In The Moment
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Happy Easter!
Written for Mom and Dad.
You two cared for me all of my life.
I love you guys! Though it may not show,
I miss you when you're away. This book's about stuff,
and I drew some experiences of Ambrosia from my own family.

"In the beginning, it is always dark."
Childlike Empress, *The Neverending Story*

"In the moment of creation, God created the heavens and the earth."
Genesis 1:1, *Aiken Abridged Bible*

"God is an artist, and all the universe is his work of art."
Saint Thomas Aquinas

"All the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players.
They have their exits and their entrances..."
Shakespeare, *As You Like It*

"When I was alone as one, my eyes were as blind, I know. Sky brilliant with blue elegance, I couldn't behold. When I was alone as one, my heart was as ice, so cold. Wind whispering sweet melodies, I could not behold. Sight to my eyes, and warmth to my heart, your love has been such to me. Pull closer now, and strengthen my leaning, toward love to heal all my wounds. When our hearts both beat in time, there's magic in your smile, it seems there's nothing we can't do. And within your warm embrace, my heart will find a place, even from afar, our love forever shall be destiny..."
Lucia's Theme, *Lunar: Eternal Blue*

"One evening late in the summer, Kaguya-hime was sitting on a balcony looking at the moon and was crying very much. Her old father would come up to her and ask what the problem was and Kaguya-hime replied that she knew that one day she would eventually leave him and that her home was actually in the moon; she was sent down to earth to take care of them but eventually the time would come where she had to leave. She did not want to leave them but she must. She said that when the next full moon came, the people from the moon would come and get her."
Tale of the Bamboo Cutter

Author's Note

When I wrote *Oracle of Tao*, it was originally intended as a self-contained concept. The idea behind the book came from a story that I worked with in computer programming class with a friend. Eventually, I discovered how to make games on Rpg Maker 2003, and managed to hash together a lot of concepts into a coherent story. Then some years after that, I was working at the library and I decided to make the game into a book. Anyway, without much to do (as I eventually left that job rather unceremoniously), boredom gave way to depression. I generally need something to do, or I get moody.

I thought about making the *Town of Winter* as a prequel after figuring out that it didn't actually work as a sequel. Then after that book was finished, I discovered that I really didn't feel up to doing too much editing, but I sorta latched onto the idea of making the trilogy in *Oracle of Tao* part of a larger trilogy. And so this book started to take shape. I asked a friend whether they would prefer a prequel or a sequel, and they said "a sequel" at roughly the time I was thinking of drafting a prequel to the events of *Town of Winter.* Damn.

Each of these books deals with an aspect of my life. *Oracle of Tao* is about my journeys out to explore the world and eventually coming home to be with my parents. *Town of Winter* is about my childhood mostly.

In The Moment was a sequel, but I had a problem, since *Oracle of Tao* had multiple endings, as a result of its video game origin. And so, for a finale, I latched on the idea of merging past and present, and different versions of reality. *In The Moment* is mostly about the sense of getting older and wondering if my parents will be okay. How time slips away, and we can't be immortal in this life.

In a sense, Ambrosia, although she is young, is going through the stages of getting older. She is caught between looking toward the future, and being wrapped up in the past. At the time of writing, my niece Claire Evangeline has just recently been born. Tamashii (and later Rakuen) play out the heroic story, as it is no longer really about Ambrosia.

My growing faith also led me to revise some concepts. My books still had fantastic creatures, references from movies and books, world religion, and such. But now I was beginning to think of the Taoist and Buddhist ideas in terms of grace. Ambrosia and friends are weird, and in some cases morally flawed. Yet God gives them a purpose, and moves them towards their quest. It's a quest to see that the typical goals of a hero's quest simply do not matter.

Prologue

In which the end of a trilogy begins

THE WORLD

In a bed, a woman slept. She was not known to many of the people of the world, yet her impact had been significant. This may have something to do with her saving the world on two separate occasions. This woman's name was Ambrosia Brahman. At the moment though, she was having a dream. This is how it started.

Outside her farmhouse, the chirping of birds, the croaking of bullfrogs, and the rushing of wind hitting the scarecrow dubbed Mr Zuran might have awakened anyone else, as might her husband Nevras as he pushed her arm away since her body was sprawled all across the bed. But she was a heavy sleeper, and none of this made the slightest impact. She continued to dream deeply even as he went to the bathroom, came back and cuddled with her. She continued to dream even though her daughter Tamashii had knocked a toy over with her stray psychokinetic energies while have a nightmare of her own. It was just a plushie though, so it didn't make that much noise.

This is how it started. She had this dream, and before she knew it, everything inside her got mixed up. She had the dream, and she couldn't keep reality straight anymore. The dream? Oddly enough, it was fairly simple.

A girl sat near the beach building a series of sandcastles. Only, these were not amateur castles, like one would make with a mold. These were quaint houses and cottages of a small town. She made a mother and father, a witch, plenty of random townspeople, temples, shops, and a small bridge with the whole town just one part of an entire continent. By all rules of gravity, these sand people shouldn't hold up, but they did. The girl was covered in shadow so her face wasn't clear. But she continued to sculpt these things, making other towns with people of their own.

The waves came, and everything near the coast washed away. The girl cried out, seeing all that she had sculpted wash away, but the noticed about five figures had held up, probably because of the house absorbing most of the moisture before it could hit them.

There was a mermaid, a fox girl, an elf, a gnome, and a dryad. The sixth figure nearby them hadn't washed away, but was unrecognizable, so she re-sculpted, making a young man. She wondered if that had been right, as it might have been a woman before. Carefully, she dug under the sculptures, moving four of them back by shifting the sand under them.

But the waves came again, and this time the fox girl and the woman she had just made were swept away. The look of anguish on her face was visible. Her face! As she walked away disappointed with the temporal nature of created things, Ambrosia saw her own face in focus, pained by the loss of these sand sculptures.

Ambrosia awoke with a start, shocked by the dream. But like most dreams, it faded into her memory. But its effects on her psyche did not, as she would drift between the past for weeks to come. Ambrosia was young, far too young to become senile or have dementia. Yet she may as well have had this happen, as after this dream, she couldn't stop thinking about the past and the future. She was caught in the grasp of time, and distraction ran her life now. The need to reminisce crept into her waking thoughts. She could no longer live in the moment, so she saw the future.

TAMASHII

My mother was stuck in a room, as I said before, with three choices. She could kill an angel before he did horrible things, knowing that it could taint her soul in horrible ways. She could walk away, allowing the aforementioned angel to possibly recover and wreak further havoc later on. Or she could heal the angel using her Console that she got from God. But I'd seen her use that before. Most of the others hadn't noticed, but I, with my psychic abilities, am tuned to the frequencies of existence and reality. Ambrosia had almost left this reality for whatever is Beyond The World, when she last used the powers of God, to help others. Oh yes, I imagine I'm not supposed to know. But I'm a sharp kid, I noticed things over the last few years growing up. Should she heal Estheriel this way, there would be no coming back from it. I'd probably never see her again, until the day I died.

As Estheriel lay dying, she said, “You've got me at your mercy. Now what will you do to me?” I told her something that I'd heard from some bad movie, “The likes of you don't deserve mercy.” My mom basically told me to shush then, while she thought. After a minute or a few, she made up her mind.

FIRST BRANCH

Ambrosia said, “I'm sorry, but I'm tired of mercy. Mercy was what allowed Belial to be sealed so long. And God's mercy turned you into such a nuisance.” She pulled out her knife, misusing her memento that she got so long ago from Nevras.

Estheriel was already bleeding, having a spear run through her. She was on the ground and wouldn't have been able to move without worsening her condition. She told Ambrosia, “I was only trying to make an ideal world... I'm innocent.”

Ambrosia had an “evil” side. She wasn't evil at all, actually. She was just unrestrained, and Ambrosia was afraid of this side of herself. Although, her voice always seemed unsettling.

“Wait... I don't think you should do this,” this evil half said. Ambrosia snarled at her, her distrust of her other self clear, “That's all the more reason to do it, isn't it? You're my evil self!” Nevras spoke next, “I'm a bit worried too, Ambrosia. You've become obsessed with hatred.”

Ambrosia said, “No. She deserves to die.” Nevras also noticed, as he was already in tears. “Please,” he said, “I'm losing you.” The evil Ambrosia told her, “If you do this, I won't exist. You'll have become me...” But Ambrosia decided that Estheriel was always going to try to threaten her family and herself. She shook her head against her other self, ignoring her words.

Ambrosia stubbornly refused her other self, and her other self was getting more and more sad and frustrated. “No,” Ambrosia said, “his death will end millions.” Evil Ambrosia was on the verge of tears, “Why? Why won't you listen to me? Do you hate me this much?”

Estheriel sobbed, “When I die, you'll become a murderer.” Yet Ambrosia said, “It's better this way. **Now die**!” She slit his throat with her First Material knife, and her eyes changed, becoming dim and turn

a duller tone of blue. It was as though she had tainted her soul. After that, she started stabbing the angel until it looked more like Swiss cheese than a living thing. Her friends and family had to pull her away, but she went back and continued until she was covered in blood. At one point, she even opened up the body with her bare hands and started playing with internal organs, until Nevras finally grabbed her and shook her. “What has happened to you, Ambrosia?” Nevras asked, “Have you gone completely mad?!?” She looked like a wild animal!

Her eyes shifted again, as though she had one last trace of remorse, then it was gone. “Heh. Heh. Ahahahaha!!!” Ambrosia laughed. “You still don't understand, do you? The significance of this place. It's not just a lair.” Nevras looked confused, “What are you talking about? What is this place?” She explained, “I'll tell you. Sue me if you think I'm crazy. For awhile now the world you knew was just a dream. God was the only one... Oh and here's the kicker. As Oracle, I was born as an avatar of God.” Tamashii shivered, “I'm scared of Mom, Dad. And... what's an aviator?” She corrected, “That would be 'avatar', dear. A person like me as representative of God showed the traits most prominent of God, so I too existed and could be used as a replacement for God, if God wanted to retire or something. I took over for God, and gave birth to everyone in this area.”

Nevras asked, “So we're not real? You think a love like ours was fake all along?” She blushed, “Nevras...” Shutting her eyes and acting all disinterested, she said, “Very well. I will spare your lives for now. But soon, I will make them all pay. After all, I created them, so now I must destroy. Balance dictates it, as the Oracle of Tao.” Ambrosia's face appeared to conceal emotions of love, even to herself, walking away as though it was an afterthought.

Not long after when the group left this place, they received word that the towns all around the land were being destroyed by some weird magic. Even soldiers and magic users sent to stop this failed. They followed the trail, and it became clear that Ambrosia had been busy ending lives. Elias managed to extrapolate that her main target was going to be Opening, before she headed south to other towns. Mom

hated Opening, not just for herself, but for what that town put her daughter through. They met her in the forest on the way to town.

Ambrosia started muttering to herself, “Yes, that's good. Heeheehohohahaha! But it's not enough. In order to be safe from Them, I mustn't stop here. All the people living in small villages, or the forests, I must hunt down.” She continued to rant, “Yes, I must kill them all... Or They will come to get me too. I'll not exist. I must kill to stay alive. It has to be done. Otherwise, my quest was useless. Yes... It was useless! Hahahahaha....”

The group met her, and Nevras shouted, “Stop right there, Ambrosia!” Tamashii said, “Mom, we're here to stop you!” And Lilith said, “I'm not.” She didn't seem to recognize any of them, but Lilith largely left Ambrosia alone in the coming battle. “Well, ummm. Most of us are here to stop you, Mommy!” Tamashii amended. Lilith walked off, leaving the others.

Ambrosia asked, “Who are you? Have we met?” Tamashii sobbed, “She doesn't remember us...” Nevras said, “I hate to do this, but we need to. *Attack her*!” And so, Ambrosia's bonds to her loved ones had broken.

Nevras a Speed Slash, while Michael tried to attack her with his sword. But she sidestepped out of the way, and they wound up attacking each other. Azrael and Zoe attacked her with spells, but then she used Apollo Crest and knocked everything back at them. The others tried different things, but she shrugged them all off. “Is that really your best? What's wrong?” she asked. Tamashii gasped, “Guys, be careful! Her power is fueled by her emotions, and right now... She's totally over the edge. I think we might die here!” And then activated her Tao ability, as she muttered, “Something about them is annoying. I must make these voices stop.” The Yin and Yang flowed through her body, then echoed against these targets and back. Ambrosia faltered as the Tao showed her own feeling, before she lost her mind again. The recoil of the Resonance injured her body, but she shrugged this off. Zoe and Azrael survived since they were immortals now, but the Tao ability put them in enough pain that they were disabled.

Ambrosia's wounds reflected in the Tao, as the Tao ability uses her mood. When she is stable, it works fine. When she is depressed, it hurts her. So when she was insane... any wounds to others would destroy her. And so, as her body began to break down, she sobbed as the her feelings of regret mixed with madness. Using the last of her powers, she split reality at that choice, branching to find an ideal future for herself.

SECOND BRANCH

What Ambrosia did next was obscured from human vision. The others saw her holding a clear rectangle, and seemed to be banging down on it with her fingers. They saw a light extended from above, and saw a burst of prismatic light wash over the body of Estheriel. The angel's eyes opened and they sat up. Estheriel asked, “Why... Why did you save me?”

Ambrosia breathed in like she was gonna give some kinda long and moving speech. She said, “You were right about many things. This world is lonely, terrible, crass, and unjust. People die pointless deaths and it's unlikely to get better. But you were wrong about two things. What the world needs is not God's justice, but God's mercy and love. And, I'm not God's replacement. I'm God.” And with that, she kinda did one of those creepy things where something pops out of their skin. A big ball of light took shape as a more intensely brilliant Ambrosia walked out of her old physical body. Now Ambrosia was far more like herself. Nevras stared at her in shock. The others averted their eyes, but he couldn't help but stare despite reading lore about the dangers of looking at the true form of God.

Before she continued, though, Nevras asked her, “What?!? Really? When did that happen?” Ambrosia explained, her face literally glowing, “Remember when we were fighting Belial and everything sorta blacked out for a second? Well, there was a lot of stuff I didn't tell you.” Tamashii said, “The nerve! Keeping stuff from your husband like that!” Ambrosia shrugged, “Ah well, it wasn't something that you'd believe anyway.”

Ambrosia with an idle motion shrunk the Universe Egg that we were inside somehow without crushing everyone, resting it in her

hand. However, she was new at this. She realized about that time that they were standing in midair. She quickly manifested a clear white disc below all of everyone so they wouldn't fall to their doom, blushing as she did so. She explained while touching the Egg, “Nevras and everyone else didn't really exist except as a dream, until I helped create them. That's what this Egg we're in is for.” She juggled the Egg briefly, then getting bored, returned it to full size in the space behind her. “So now you know...” she continued, with some feelings of fear of judgement for her secret, “You don't want anything to do with me, do you Nevras? Tamashii? Guys?”

There was a long awkward pause. But her family immediately loved her, though Nevras was so dumbfounded he was unable to speak for a second. Tamashii thankfully broke the silence, “Are you kidding?!? That's like the coolest thing my mom can be!” She suddenly found herself in a big group hug with Nevras and Tamashii. “We can join you when you head up to Heaven, right?” I asked. She nodded, “Of course! I'll need some company, and you guys are family!” Tamashii asked, “What will happen to God's angels? And for that matter, God?” Ambrosia explained, “They'll still be part of Heaven. My mom and dad will probably be reborn. Estheriel, I forgive you. You're welcome there too.” In the midst of all of this excitement, Nevras's heart gave out.

THIRD BRANCH

Ambrosia told her, “Forget it. I'm not healing you. And I'm not killing you. I don't care about your stupid vengeance against God, I wanna live my life. If you heal up, great for you. Otherwise, that's your problem.” She was leaving this problem in what Elias called Schrodinger's cat, although in this case, the “cat” was actually actively being impaled by a giant spear and slowly bleeding to death.

Ambrosia motioned to her husband and child, “Let's go, Nevras. You too, kid.” Nevras said, “Of course,” and held Tamashii's hand as they walked out of this place. They made it back to their farmhouse and enjoyed the finer things in life. They saw their friends Lilith and Aqorm, as well as Michael and Lilith tend to their families. Zoe and Azrael managed to have a child too, as did Yazim Jianne and Selqui

using the power of mad science. They named their child Sarai, after his late wife.

Tamashii enjoyed her time with her friends Sastraneth and Portia. Though lately Portia was nowhere to be found, and a boy named Bakamaru instead seemed to come around frequently. “Can I play with Tamashii, Miss Brahman?” he asked. Ambrosia let him, so long Tamashii agreed. “Sure,” said Ambrosia, “Tamashii, play nice with him. Be gentle.” Tamashii on the other hand, was a punk. “Awwwww,” she say, “but he's weak.” Well, she's not wrong. When she’s got psychic powers that can kill a yak from hundreds of yards away with mind bullets, it was a valid point. “Hey,” Ambrosia's voice was stern now, “trust me on this. You drive him away, you'll end up a lonely woman.” For some reason, Tamashii seemed to know him. Sastra seemed to like him too.

Years passed. They all got older. Tamashii became a fine woman. She married Bakamaru when she was about 18, and seemed to be pretty happy. “Thank you, darling, for being there all these years,” said the boy.

Then it happened... “Okay, honey, push!” said Bakamaru to a very pregnant Tamashii. Tamashii had become more hard-edged over the years. “What do you think I'm trying to do, you jerk!” she snarled at him. For the next several minutes, she made groaning sounds, breathing out, until at last the rest of the child appeared. It was a girl. They called her Rakuen, the name for Heaven, for she was their greatest treasure.

More years passed, and another change was going to happen.... For you see, while powerful thaumaturgy can allow many people to live long after the normal lifespan, Nevras and Ambrosia don't have any special powers. When Tamashii got to be middle-aged, they got old. “*cough* *cough* *wheeze* *cough* *wheeze*” Ambrosia said. They were sleeping all the time. They were forgetting things. And Ambrosia limped quite a bit. “Mother, you mustn't die! I still have many things I wanna do with you,” Tamashii said. Ambrosia responded, “You can do them with your husband now. I'm sure he won't mind.” Nevras told her, “Listen to her. *cough* *cough* I'm

afraid I'm not that long for this world either...” Ambrosia grabbed Nevras, hoping not to fall. It was time to go, so they left this world. They died in each others arms.

Chapter 1

In which God tries to recap the creation of the entire universe

GOD

Hey there. So many stories tell about reality in the framework of the beginning of things. But this is poor phrasing grammatically, since there really is no beginning and no real end either, aside from a kind of finale.

So a more correct term would be "after the moment of creation". Very few of them deal in the exact moment of creation, and even less show any consideration at all to before the creation. Now, some of you reader may think that such a question is meaningless, because there was in fact no time or space before such things were created. In fact, there cannot even be said to be laws of physics until an actual universe was created to house such things. But I think you know why you don't give much thought to this. It isn't because such an answer isn't interesting. It is more than a bit interesting thinking about a world without time and space, and how I bypassed the limits that would halt you humans in your tracks to create something out of nothing when these same laws of physics say that matter and energy can't be created or destroyed. You see, as interesting as it is to talk about before the creation, we humans can't do so without going insane and muttered to yourself, "Nothing is real, nothing is real, nothing is real, nothing is real..."

I imagine you think that I am kidding. But then, you readers haven't personally seen the white screen, the empty set that I work with in order to make time and space, and all manner of events in every existing reality. Nor do you fully grasp what it means to create something. Doing so would drive sentient creatures mad, as they struggle with their sense of being in a universe where life is made from me.

Long ago, as though such a thing can be said before time, there wasn't even a white screen. There was only me, sitting alone in the

universe. I was perfect, everything was perfect. Only everything was undifferentiated so I really had no way of knowing whether things actually were perfect or not, since there was no good or bad to measure it against. I was male and female, a hermaphrodite. There were no distinctions, and everything was equal. With equality, everything breaks down into meaninglessness. It is only when things are distinct that there is value. And so, I divided myself into God and Void. Now, I had form and consciousness, and the capability to know good from evil. And I walked upon the surface of the Void, and was not consumed or halted like created things might be. And so I said (translated roughly), "*Let there be light!*" The light shone upon the Void, and there were Reapers. And there was my white screen, expanding infinitely around me. And I set to work on creation.

But let's back up a bit here. Why did I create things in the first place? Well, why do salmon swim upstream? Why do men and women write long books about all sorts of topics from mystery to romance to nonfiction? Why do people write beautiful sonnets and paint works of art? Or struggle to overthrow dictatorships and other works of heroism? It's to get laid, of course. Because as you know, books with the title *Chilton Auto Repair: 1983-1993 Chevrolet S10 Blazer* get all the ladies to say "Take me now~!" But in a deeper sense, we strive and struggle towards things to mitigate loneliness and to keep suicidal feelings at bay. It's not good for people to be alone. Oh sure, I had Jesus with me, as John 1 tells people in the Bible, and the Spirit of God (also known as the Holy Spirit) was always sorta around somewhere as part of the Trinity. And as I say, there were angels and Reapers. But at the time before everything was created, everything was... well boring and lonely as fuck, so to speak.

Anyway, after the moment of creation ("the beginning"), I began to separate things. Light became light and darkness, the waters of the Void became water and Void, then water was further split into water, earth, and sky. I also created a sun and moon. Gradually, life arose on this world. First it was underwater grasses, then birds and fish, then land animals, finally human life in my own image.

Now, you could talk about universal time where solar systems were

made, galaxies, black holes, stars, evolution, and so on. How life arose by accident. How rocks merged together, and volcanic activity made oxygen, and life sort of evolved from a primordial pool, and randomly assembled itself through struggle like *kodoku* (according to legend, if you put bugs in a jar, they will fight to the death, until one becomes a golden bug with powers of blessings and curses). Such evolution in a vat, has never been replicated by scientists, and if it had, the amount of meddling you would need to do represents intelligent design. Life comes from life, not from death. Only I can make life where before there was none, because I Am Life & Death. Or maybe a comet randomly hit Earth, and somehow it had life on it, but you can't explain where that life came from. You would have to cycle back to the above explanation, and still be at a loss for how an explosion without any structure makes all that is. This would be like concluding that a monkey could form out of stone from the natural energy of a nearby mountain. The *Journey to the West* is an interesting story, but ultimately, the Buddha pins such a monkey under a mountain of evidence to the contrary.

Or you could talk about the geological eras from the Hadean to Proterozoic to Paleozoic to Mesozoic to Cenozoic, and talk about dinosaurs and such, and how they are totally because we found these bones over here that weren't made with plaster of Paris or *papier-mâché*. And that no plumber or electrician ever discovered such bones by accident while digging for construction, but this randomly chosen dig site, you seem to find artifact after artifact. What a coincidence! Clearly not because you intend to make huge profit selling to a museum.

But let's be honest with ourselves, shall we? You humans don't actually know whether the Void known as outer space actually exists. You don't know this, despite NASA showing you for years that space shuttles go outside the Earth's atmosphere, fly into the moon, Mars, or some other world. The universe could be built around a Yggdrasil model with worlds connected by rainbow bridges or it could assume that the Earth's is the only atmosphere that exists, that its sun and moon are in orbit within that atmosphere, and that stars are actually

angels. You don't know whether the Earth is flat or round. You humans don't even know for sure whether moon has a back side!

How then can we know for certain that dinosaurs are real, any more that whatever is said about outer space? It is true that evolution is possible, but it's only so species can survive natural disasters. Darwin wasn't the one who was right, it was the theory of catastrophism and Lamarck's theories that were correct, as well as those of Étienne Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire. These models all work on the principle that life is created, and that the mechanism of evolution only accounts for specific circumstances. It is simply not true that animals compete to be the fittest, if they did this, they would not survive. To say nothing of Hitler using these same ideas of selection to justify a genocide against the Jews. But anyway, it seems like an awful waste to make a universe, if it's mostly going to be empty of life. There are maybe other worlds out there (like I'd tell you for sure), but this nonsense of a big expanding universe and the Heat Death is just so much unproven crap. Any worlds that I may or may not have created are totally filled with life, I'll have you know! And I certainly won't tell you that maybe I did make Nine Worlds, and a few other dimensions.

Over six days, that is to say six billion years, though scientists now have revised that date to 4.5 billion years, I formed together the Earth. The 4.5 billion years they admit to was *after* my first experiment. My first experiment was not you humans reading this now, but creatures called Drudges. Now, the Drudges were not made like organic life. They did not need to breathe, they could live without air, water, or anything really. I wanted to see if I could make something that would keep me company. So I created these beings 6 billion years ago using a forge. From lava and iron, I cast such a thing, it was sturdy and able to shrug off any of the physical forces of the world. A Drudge could take down a dragon if I ordered it to. And Drudges were very obedient, more so even than my angels.

So I decided upon a test to see if they were a worthy creation. I placed them in a garden among living things. These inorganic creatures were assigned two tasks. They were told not to eat from the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge of Good & Evil, and they were told to

name the creatures that lived, and till the fields of my garden. I told them it would be very sinful if they should eat this fruit, guarded it by nothing, and got made like an old solid snake or something to tell them that they should totally eat from the Tree because it enhanced their hardware. Instead, I head them say, "WE. HAVE. RECEIVED. PRIOR. ORDERS. THOSE. ORDERS. ARE. LAW. THESE. ORDERS. CONFLICT. WITH. THOSE. ORDERS. WE. CAN. LOGICALLY. TAKE. NO. ACTION..."

Later, I approached them. I asked them for a report of their progress naming various animals. They said, "ERROR. WE. HAVE. BEEN. UNABLE. TO. NAME. ANY. OF. THESE. LIFEFORMS. YOU. HAVE. ASSIGNED. TO. US. THE. FILE. HAS. NOT. BEEN. FOUND..." It turned out that Drudges didn't have any creativity, so they couldn't name any object, much less living beings. In fact, in order that they have names at all, I had to write a serial number on each of them using a barcode. Nor had they done what I'd liked in the farming. Oh yes, they had tilled a field, but they didn't seem to understand how to choose crops to plant, leaving a barren line in my garden. There was no sign that they had eaten from the Tree of Knowledge of Good & Evil, or in fact any other tree in all that time. They were obedient and perfect, and I hated them. They had no kindness, no remorse, no ambition, no restraint, no happiness, no sadness, and no humanity. They were machines that were on, but completely incapable of what I actually wanted for company. And so, I manifested a sledgehammer and smashed those suckers to kingdom come.

Ironically, later humans themselves would try to make robots, although theirs were coded as assistants rather than trying to make sentient lifeforms. So I suppose I could congratulate them for trying to copy me. But robots suck. Anyway, all of this brings up an interesting line of thought. According to most Bibles, the free will provided by the Tree of Knowledge of Good & Evil was somehow sinful and that eventually at end times we'd be without sin. I find this interesting because supposedly it implies that I like robots. Let me assure you, I tried that experiment.

I sighed, and tried a second time at creating life. This time, I created a being from dust and dreams. I used dust, because like clay, I could mold them as I liked. I used dreams, because dreams were part of the spirit. When I slept, human existed. When I awakened, the Day of the Lord came, and all humans reverted back to nothing. But in the mean time, this meant that humans had a mortal body made from clay, and an immortal body made of spirit. And so, I took a long rest for a day while these first two humans lived. I had to wake up, as I felt there was a problem.

Chapter 2

In which Ambrosia teaches Tamashii to make sand sculptures

AMBROSIA

I awoke with a feeling that something was out of sorts, but I couldn't really pin things down. My daughter Tamashii asked me if everything was okay. Tamashii, a cute little girl with deep purple hair, was a Soulfire. This meant that from the age that she was born, she had psychic powers, and she was able to walk and talk right out of the womb. I told her, "I had a dream that didn't agree with me, and I can't remember it now." Tamashii looked concerned, and I could see her mind working to find something to cheer me up. At this time, she was only two. "We could go to the beach?"

I nodded. I did indeed want to go to the beach, as I had an affinity for a lot of water-related things, especially fishing. I also had blue hair. No, I didn't dye my hair or my daughter's. That would be strange to do that to a two-year-old. Thousands of years of genetics made it possible for unique hair and eye colors. In any case, since our farm was within walking distance of the beach, I was fond of visiting for recreation.

Tamashii is a cute kid, but remarkably precocious. As someone who always goofed off in school, I honestly can't understand how she got to be so brilliant at such a young age, but for some reason, I don't want her growing up to be harsh and cold. So we give plenty of fun and love in her life, but also teach her to be kind and accept constructive criticism. We train her. We don't want her growing up like Captain Marvel, cold and perfect, wanting to smash the

patriarchy. Nor should she be an entitled prick. A child should be a child, and have some hardship to her life.

Right now, for instance, she learned that while she can psionically deflect water, some of it always knocks her over. And then I realized that even though she could walk at age two, it didn't matter if the waves were much higher. "***Tamashii*!!!**" I scream, seeing a wave much taller than her bowl her over, and other waves threaten to suck her under. I dive in, swimming at full speed. It isn't like I'm concerned about her or anything...

TAMASHII

I awoke, spitting out water. Mom was always so calm and deadpan. She looked completely composed right now, even though I had just almost drowned. "So let's teach you how to make sandcastles," she said. She walked over to the water line, and scooped up up some sand and added some seawater from the waves. "So first, let's teach you how to make a drip castle." She reached her fingers into the muddy sand and used her index, middle, and thumb to slowly squeeze out water and sand. The sand slowly stacked to form a fairy story castle. Ambrosia also showed how to make castles from molds, and manage different moisture levels to get the sand to set properly. She explained that most sand on the beach was too granular and lacked the needed component of silt to act as a binder. We were living on the outskirts of Opening at this time, and Opening had plenty of silt in its sand due to the nearby quartz mines used to make the walls of the city.

She packed it together, showing how to make incredibly realistic sculpture of a woman, using carving tools the scrape layers into smooth lines. This woman looked like Mom herself but there was a sort of look to her that I had never seen on my mother. She also wore fancy clothes and carried a staff with a triangular crest on the top. I was amazed at how detailed and well packed this was, but all of a sudden, I noticed that Ambrosia's eyes had a sort of trance-like quality to them, as though she was lost in thought about what she was seeing.

AMBROSIA

Suddenly, I remembered our visit to Atlantis, and how there was a set of hands molding sand depicted on a stone tablet there. And then I

remembered my dream this morning. And then my mind revisited another memory. About two years or so ago, God had sent me on a quest to stop the demon Belial. I had met a bunch of friends, like Nevras the swordsman who I later married, Aqorm the half-elf (who later became a full elf thanks to other elves tinkering with her bloodline), Elias the scholar priest, Azrael the exorcist, Zoe the druid, and there were an angel, demons, and sorcerer in my group. The sorcerer Yazim Jianne had made a bargain to release the demon Belial from an urn, having been tricked by him with promises that he would revive his wife. Never mind that resurrection spells did exist and even miracles from God were possible (so long as a person didn't die in certain ways like old age), this insane goofball wanted to make a clone of her soul because he thought that she might possibly enjoy the afterlife. While resurrection was possible, what he asked was not restoring life to a corpse but creating life out of nothing and making an artificial soul. We set him straight eventually, and he traveled with us to the city of Atlantis, where we met the more-than-slightly insane merfolk named Selqui. This seal girl was trying to summon an Elder Formless when we first met her. It was here that we saw the stone tablets. But all of this was after I had gone back in time after a breakup with Nevras made me so moody that as Oracle of Tao, I couldn't use my ultimate attack properly. The Tao spun out of control and killed me instead because I was in a shitty mood. Anyway, the second try, we totally kicked his ass. And then it happened.

Belial had at last been defeated. His body had been pulverized to an evil spirit and a bag of bones, and then the spirit had been drained of its potency. "**Yay!** He's dead!" I shouted with joy. All of a sudden though, I felt something weird. You know, you're watching a movie and there's something scratched up with the video and it skips? Anyway, that's what seemed to happen, there was a sort of ripple, and the villain disappeared from stage like a frame stopping. "What just happened? Guys, what do you think...?" I looked around. Nevras was gone too. So were the others. "Guys??? What happened? You're... gone. Why?" And then everything fell apart.

The space around me fell away completely leaving only openness. I

looked around, and saw the floating triangular form of God. *I BELIEVE I CAN ANSWER THAT*, God said to me. As I watched however, the recognized form of God fell away, and I stared at my own face, identical except for clothing. She carried a long robe and a stylized staff tipped with the Trinity symbol. In fact, it looked remarkably like the sculpture that I was working on.

"Or, should I say," she said in actual words, "I believe I can." God looked had an intense stare, like someone who had seen the universe. Yet she looked like me. How could this be?!? Yet I managed to share my indifference. "You're me? But..." I sighed, "oh, nevermind. After evil twins, nothing surprises me anymore."

God shrugged, "You should be at least a **little** surprised. After all, this will be hard to take at first. You've heard, I gather, about the First Oracle?" I recited from memory, "Of course. The Oracle completed his training and then went off to face Belial, but he disappeared and..." But then something occurred to me. I said, "He **ceased** to exist! Don't tell me what Belial was trying to get me to believe earlier was true?" For context, Belial told me that nothing was real, especially my existence.

God shook her head, which felt strange after seeing God for so long in only triangular form, "No. But here's what I'm telling you. The First Oracle disappeared because he saw what all Oracles see, that human existence is a Dream. It's time for us to Awaken." Images suddenly flooded into my head of of my experiences as God before even time existed. How she invented all sorts of stories to keep her company, and even developed video games for herself to play long before humans (especially *Zelda* and *Okami*), but watching stories of people she made up was no good. That's right, actors are not real people.

I remembered grasping the Void, and weaving it into stuff to keep me company. But it was never enough for my (her?) loneliness. I felt her connection with the Void because it too had nobody and nothing, since it *was* nothing. It was *not good* to be alone.

God continued some more, "The Void is never one thing in particular, so it could be forged into anything. But nothing made from it lasts, as all things return to the Void. I began to realize that I existed

to create others, and because I existed, the Void loved me. My first creation was truly horrible, they were soulless robots crafted by my hands. They could neither love nor hate, nor did they have any desires. So I discarded them as a failed creation. Like humans, I could sleep, so I dreamed of this world and the humans in it. They were just as I wanted, only they weren't real. But... But... now it's time for you to become part of me, and for us to wake up!" I saw myself working on robots and then smashing them apart with a sledgehammer.

And then I saw death. Not as living things see it, but to see it from a perspective of an immortal. To explain it would be like explaining sight to a blind person, so different was this experience from anything a mortal encountered in their daily life.

I remembered the stone tablets in Atlantis, and how they depicted not only someone sleeping but the image of someone molding sand. No wonder humans were so prone to dying, they were like sand sculptures which take hours to make, toppled by the waves, and then rebuilt again. And then, my memories overlapped, and suddenly, I saw the memories of God instead.

GOD

My first attempt at humans rather than Drudges was much the same, only I wanted to see the male and female dynamic of humans. So I made two humans named Adam and Lilith. What's that you say? Lilith is a member of Ambrosia's group? No, different Lilith. And you biblical scholars tell me that it should be Adam and Eve.

No look, before Adam and Eve, Adam had another wife. Adam was a hermaphrodite at this time, as the term "rib" is a mistranslation. The actual word means "side", that is to say, humans originally had two sides and could become male or female simply by turning around. But while these were human, made in flesh of the dust of the earth and fashioned in my image, they were quite different in practice from the dynamics of human relationships today. Lilith wanted to be on top once in awhile, but Adam always to be in the male role. This led to a nasty argument, and eventually she ran off. My angels asked her to come back but she got all miffed and said she would curse any children that Adam had with death. I lifted that curse but she was

pretty bitter about things for quite awhile, until I arranged her reincarnation in order that she might have a chance at new happiness. Hey you, don't accuse me of killing her. I concluded that the problem was related to the fact that the two of them were separate entirely from each other. So I put Adam into a deep sleep and separated his male side from his female side. He took one look at her and immediately fell for his "other half." And so he set to work naming the creatures of the world that I had brought before him. He had done some of this naming while she was with Lilith, but Lilith was a little weird. Duck-billed platypus? Gingko? Axolotl? Barreleye? Blobfish? Sea pig? Capybaras? Manatees? Narwhals? Naming assigned traits to the things of this world, just as naming a boy Sue gave them a complex about his masculinity. Yeah, like the song. Everything Lilith and Adam named together had odd traits because they were given weird names. But the things that Adam and Eve named together were beautiful and wondrous, not derpy like a pug.

TAMASHII

"Ambrosia? Ambrosia!" Nevras said. "Mom! Are you okay?" I asked. Mom blinked, as though she was reliving some kind of memories. Or having a blue screen of doom. After a bit, her mind was back, and she hugged me, "Sorry guys, I was kind of outta it."

Chapter 3

In which forbidden fruit is eaten

AMBROSIA

I needed to get my head straight. Over the next few months, I things calmed down and the experience became a distant memory. Years later, I had forgotten that this had happened, when it snuck up on me again. Tamashii was about five this time. I awoke that day at sunrise, fed and milked any animals we had. We had fifteen goats and two pigs, not to mention all the little ones that I planned to raise to adulthood before deciding what to do with. We'd probably have more goats than we knew what to do with, though I certainly knew what to do with any excess pigs: sausage, bacon, pork loin, and ribs.

The goats were easy milking, I pumped the goat and shared some with her young, then bottled the rest. I typically did this one whenever

we needed milk for the day, letting the goats get the rest. Pig milking on the other hand, was a pain in the ass. Anyone who has even milked a cow remembers the alternating pulling of four teats as the cow sprays milk into a bucket. A pig on the other hand can have anywhere from 6 to 32 teats, depending on the breed. It also gives milk every two hours in fairly small batches, which are drunk by hungry pigs, and the sow really doesn't like it if you get between its children and her. So, it's easy right? Just milk her when her pigs aren't hungry. Well... no. She likes being touched by humans even less, and the pig outweighed me by several hundred pounds. But I was no slouch, having faced down an actual greater demon and prevailed. The first time this sow opposed me, I body slammed her, and punched her in several pressure points. The next time I tried to milk her, I gave her a hard glare and she meekly consented. But that brings us to the third problem. Even if she cooperated, she only had small amounts left after her piglets were done before the next time. It took me and all my friends helping out more than 20 hours of intermittent milking to produce enough to make cheese. And then there was the added time of making cheese, since I wasn't about to drink this milk after this effort, it was going to be sold for lots of Gold. After that, I was pretty tired.

While Aqorm, Elias, Michael, Selqui, Yazim Jianne, Azrael, and Zoe were helping me and Lilith was sitting in a chair giving directions (well, until Elias stumbled, as a result of being bookish and not very athletic, and then she moved in between Aqorm and Michael... like she always did), Nevras was hoeing rows for our farm. As you know, crops grow quickly on the New Earth, so he planted carrots, turnips, and lettuce and harvested it while This obviously influences the vegetable economy but this surplus means they don't have to sell as much because they enough for subsistence. There's also the matter of the soil needing to be fallow for at least 24 hours after a big harvest like that, so he couldn't exactly keep planting veggies on the same day. Once the plant was harvested, Nevras collected its seeds (except the turnip, as that one had been pulled up). The next day, I prepped the cheese, mixing the milk with vinegar then heating it up until curds

formed. I added a culture to the mixture from yogurt and took it off the heat. I also added some rennet at this point. Then I cut and stirred the curds until they were smaller grains. Life on the farm had taught me some skills, so I was going ahead with this. Then I slowly cooked the mushed substance again to dry it out a bit. I put the substance into a presser and salted it in a brine. I would eventually age it up to six months but for now, I was done. The others had long since left us, having only helped for the milking process. I went to go check on Nevras. All of us looked pretty exhausted from a long two days of farming, so I milked the goats again today, and the three of us went to a nearby apple tree, and picked a fruit and started munching. "Aaaah, this is the life," Nevras commented. Nevras had known the life of a royal, yet now he seemed content with the quiet life of a farmer. At least, I hoped he was content. I nodded, "It's nice to be able to sit and eat an apple, and enjoy what God has given us." I wasn't yet ready to tell him that God had told me that I was God, even though I don't remember planting these crops or being involved in giving these animals their milk. I wondered how this worked, when I began to daydream again.

GOD

"You shall not eat from the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge of Good & Evil, nor should you touch it, or you will die," I warned the two of them. I had given this same warning to Drudges, but now you readers know that it was a trick. There were no creatures guarding the Tree. Nor was the fruit out of reach. Nor was difficult to find. If anything, it was placed in such a way that it would create an appropriate temptation. I wanted any being that I made to keep me company to be able to make choices to do so of their own free will. And so, I made this enticing. The fruit of the tree looked attractive to the woman Eve's eyes, and a snake actually asked her, "Did God really say that you must not eat from any tree in the garden?" Eve was an easy mark, entirely too naive to argue on this point. She shook her head and explained that only the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge of Good & Evil was off limits, with even touching the tree causing death. But the snake explained, "You will not surely die, for God knows that in the

day you eat of it, your eyes will be opened and you will be like God, knowing good and evil."

Yes, I know. You've seen movies where the fruit looks like an apple. But I kinda was there. You see, I spoke through the snake. Nor did I lie. There is a movie known as *Christmas Perfection*, where a girl gets trapped inside a perfect Christmas village. Everything happens just the right way, and the day repeats over and over, until she finally realizes that she doesn't want the ideal, she wants the real. The immortal life offered in Eden is not real life. The snake (me) offered a choice, to truly *live* or not to die.

So, when parts of the Bible that say that in end times, humans will no longer sin and things will return to the state of Eden, be wary. Such "scripture" is from the devil. Sin and death are part of the state of human existence. I already created a solution to such a problem, when I died by hanging on a tree. Yet humans always think that they can be cured of evil. As for what the fruit looks like, imagine something closer to COVID-19 cell. I know you're scared, and tempted to whip out your mask. But the COVID cell looks identical to the cold cell, as both at rough artist's representations. Both are roughly shown as spiky fruits, so you might as well imagine dragonfruit.

Think of it like this. A virus is able to alter the genetic structure of things. A retrovirus, for instance, is used for genetic sequencing. We are told that nearly all of humanity has the common code endemic in their bodies. So the attempt to cure COVID (or what has always actually been one strain of the common cold, which is either rhinovirus, coronavirus, RSV, or parainfluenza) with vaccines is an attempt to cure Knowledge of Good & Evil and to treat death itself. But there is no cure for the common cold. And in fact, the common cold is useful. Studies showed that the common cold actually helps reduce symptoms of cancer. This is because cancer is an over-replication of the bodies cells, while this kills cells. Indeed the treatments to COVID (the common cold) are all either ineffective or unreasonable. One involves using a vaccine using part of the virus, which is simply ineffective. Another uses fetal tissue from stem cells. The problem with this is that stem cells are fertile sex organs. So they

cause blood clots for obvious reasons. In case it isn't obvious to you, let me explain. The same thing that happens during a pregnancy is happening... inside your bloodstream. Yes. That is what is causing blood clots. The third uses mRNA, which turns into DNA as it moves through the system. This creates humans that are hybrids. Not truly human. However, it does not succeed in curing this state. What it does do is cure the condition of life, because in order to live in this world as a human, one must know the difference between life and death, good and evil. During these times, with the technology they had, they tried something similar. This is what is meant by the strange passage about Sons of God and daughters of men. So anyway, the Tree is not a bad thing, or it would be Knowledge of Evil only. But it's not a totally good thing either.

What is was, however, was something that humans didn't understand how to handle. Just as it is possible for a day to almost completely suck, with everything going wrong, from the car breaking down to a VCR eating tapes and needing to be replaced, it is possible for humans to get stick in a rut of negativity. And so for the next several thousand years, Eve's children kept doing crappy things to each other. Cain killed Abel, and even though I protected him with a curse, his life was miserable. His children in turn couldn't seem to stop polluting and exploiting the Earth. And so, for a long time, the Earth kinda sucked. All because people wanted to eat the spiritual equivalent of the common cold. Ah, ahh, aaahhhh (I paused, trying to stifle it), chu~!

AMBROSIA

"Hey Mom!" Tamashii said. "Mom? Well, I guess you don't mind if I take this apple, huh?" I blinked, and saw her running off with my partially munched apple, "Hey, you give that back!" Tamashii laughed, "My apple is yours for the taking, but you'll have to find me first!" She ran out of sight, and for a short while I had no idea where she was. Then I heard munching nearby, and saw her in the tree. I tickled her, and she dropped it, but she recovered and quickly snatched it up again while I spent most of the hour running after her. I sneezed, a cute sound in an already cute scene. I rubbed my nose, "I

hope I'm not getting a cold."

Chapter 4

In which Ambrosia sells some cheese, and some wrestling is done

AMBROSIA

So anyway, I got in a boat that we bought on an earlier quest and shipped my cheese to this woman that I met in Ghobli years ago. She knew how to cook food to order, and when I mentioned the pig's cheese, she wanted to buy it for about 50,000 Gold. "The things I could do with this..." she said, proceeding to list them all. It took several tries, and a few months of aging, but I finally managed to get it right. I had some *porc*orino romano, as I decided to call it. And so I packed the cheese into the boat realizing that all that effort would be wasted if anything went wrong on the boat trip. The trip was thankfully without incident, but it turned out that some other farmer had heard her say that, so my profit was only 30,000. I walked through crowds of people waiting in line, most of them better dressed, but they allowed me to enter ahead of them when I showed that I had food to deliver. "Sorry," a blond in a brown dress said, "but we have to factor for supply and demand. I was going to offer 30,000 Gold, but Trader Joseph has already managed to supply four shipments of pig cheddar." I wouldn't allow some third rate farmer to undercut my profit, so I countered, "Yes, supply and demand is a valuable rule in economics, but only applies to goods of relatively equal worth, when the item becomes more common. This is no pedestrian cheddar here, this is fine Italian cheese. And I added apple chunks to the cheese while it was setting. These are two different products." The woman was intrigued, her snowflake earrings dangling as her head turned back to the cheese in interest. "Ohh? Show me," she said. I pulled out my knife and sliced the cheese. The apple bits had been semi-dried to prevent rot, and evenly mixed during the process, lending to a homogeneous scattering of apple, and a vein of reddish brown where the sugars of the apple had mixed with the lactose. She was impressed, "Yes, this is definitely worth full price. In fact, the first recipe I make is on me. Stick around!" I was surprised at this. Normally, people who give you money don't offer to treat you to a

meal. But this was her restaurant, and she could do as she wished.

It had been awhile since I ate at a proper restaurant. The nearby town of Shoten had a temple, but they considered restaurants vain. And Opening was a military town filled with guards, who originally charged a toll to leave town. I had recently convinced the guard to pursue other sources of revenue, but none of these included fine dining, instead spending major effort on other sources of entertainment.

Over the years, we had returned to Ghobli several times. Even though it had no reason to be a trade center, since it was in the middle of some woods instead of near a port, somehow they got trade from all across the New Earth. Elias had explained it to me once, but I never understood. Something about fairy rings in the forest or ley lines. Since it was the site of our first date (well, aside from Gruumi, which gave me indigestion just thinking about that steak), I fondly remembered that time who Nevras and I shopped together, managing to scam an alchemist out of his goods and acquire a bounty. Nevras is still traumatized by what was involved in finally resolving this situation, but more importantly, this was one of the better restaurants we had eaten at, and the chef was quite talented. More importantly, she knew how to aether-roast making her a top-notch mystic chef. More importantly, her restaurant believed that the chef should also be waiter, so her food was delivered with as much care as it was made. This did mean that her restaurant had a tendency to be somewhat slower than restaurants with a head chef and a lot of wait staff. The woman, whose name turned out to be Murugi, explained the dining style of New Earth popular now was this sort of thing because it meant she could cook whatever was asked for. Waitresses and waiters had been phased out of a lot of restaurants because the owners had noticed they had no actual loyalty to the owner or the chef. They could work hard enough to be sweating blood but to the waiters, if the chef died trying to please the customers or if the restaurant went under, their loyalty was to the place and the paycheck. They were parasites, and most restaurant owners actually hated them. There was also the impossibility of paying them, as typically the tip system got

set up, resulting in workers that were actually exploited if customers refused a tip. For these reasons and because it was a far better experience for the chef to cook directly for the customer, only a few old-style restaurants existed that did it the other way.

Murugi sliced off a third of one of the halves, and put the other half to be preserved. After a moment of thought, Murugi said, "Okay, are you happy with what I want to make or you have something specific in mind?" I shook my head, "As long you can feed the three of us, I don't mind." A side effect of her type of restaurant is that customers in general were less demanding, since the chefs of old couldn't even deserve to be called chefs since they were too specialized. The menus of this restaurant told only what the chef was really good at, but chefs these days got as much training as a medical doctor. This meant that unlike choosing from a bunch of nearby restaurants that all sucked (being bored or dissatisfied was the leading cause of underpayment or mistreatment of restaurant workers), customers were willing to wait for the best version of what they wanted. But since I didn't know what I wanted, and she was offering to make what she thought might be tasty with what I brought, that was okay too. I told her to maybe make a pastry, some soup, and something that was a filling main dish. Other that that, it was up to her. She nodded, and got to work.

Murugi made flour into a dough, then divided it into two sections, pressed them into two discs, then got to work making a quick sauce out of tomatoes. She then added the sauce to each, adding sliced onions, mushrooms, and green peppers that seemed to come out of nowhere. I thought maybe they had been prepared but Tamashii and Nevras insists they saw her chopping veggies while she was also prepping the sauce. She set aside some of the onions and mushrooms for some reason. Next, she grated a fairly decent amount of cheese into each calzone, leaving about two-thirds for later. She folded the calzones, lightly brushed them with olive oil that she pressed just now and set aside some chopped olives (putting olive, onion, and mushroom in separate containers), then placed the calzones in the oven. While the calzones were sitting in the oven, she boiled macaroni, prepped a roux, made a Parmesan-onion mornay, and

poured it over the finished macaroni, then grated more cheese until about a sixth of the block that she had split off was remaining. It was still an enormous amount of cheese. We would likely have problems later, but for now it was a very rich meal. She fired up the oven. There was no preheat time, she made a condensed fireball in her hands, compressing a normal fireball into the size of a marble and closing the oven door. There were CasterTech stoves nowadays that would cook using runes, but even among restaurants that did waiting and cooking all themselves, Murugi liked to manage all aspects of dining herself. And so this stove didn't actually cook, it just contained the heat. A few seconds later, both dishes were perfectly done with their casserole trays looking unscorched. She was definitely a professional. She added olives to the top of the macaroni, and served up both meals.

While we were busy scarfing down, she made the rest of the meal. In older styles of restaurants, salad and soup were served in a particular order. But she threw that out the window, to have ingredients on hand. She finished grating, and I realized that she had skillfully separated the apples from the cheese. She prepped a salad, adding the remaining olives and onions, then adding cheese, and making a vinaigrette. She made a cream of mushroom soup. And then she finished with an apple cobbler using the apples from the cheese and some nuts and honey. All of this was done before we managed to finish the first two courses.

The dinner rush began, and the doors slid open while we were still eating. In came two brothers who were arguing whether or not a dwarf could be a druid with one of them having dyed his beard green, a furry critter bringing with him a bounty hunter arguing with a princess who was in turn traveling with someone who was clearly her brother, a boy riding on a luck dragon, a group of magical girls practicing poses, and about fifty other such groups. I had seen them on the way in, but I suppose that I expected them to wait for tables. She unfortunately had no host, due to the limitations of this style of cooking. The reason the older method hadn't been completely replaced was that for larger crowds, it was better organized. It just wasn't as

customizable, and the staff often worked at counter-purposes with the chef and manager. Murugi wanted to do everything herself, but now she had to adapt to a situation that was far more than she could handle. I remember seeing a show once called *Infinite Ryvius*, where some girl named Neya essentially acted as a kind of hive mind for an entire ship before becoming a complete person near the end of the story. When I think of Jesus, I imagine that sort of phenomenon when they describe the Body of Christ, a kind of spiritual collective. Though when I met Jesus, they were always very personal. In any case, this "ship" was in trouble right now. Murugi was a proud woman though, and probably wouldn't accept our help. This was getting tense.

"God in heaven," she muttered, "help me please..." A waitress popped out of a back room. It was Jesus, I knew from experience that it was so obviously Jesus, even though this perky redhead in pigtails with a short dress and white stockings looked nothing like paintings of Jesus. "I'm just here for today," the girl explained, "You looked busy, and I could use a few extra Gold." Murugi pulled out a bag of coins and shoved it into her dress's pocket. As Murugi prepped the same dishes (except for salad and calzones, so just macaroni, soup, and dessert) but to feed an army, the girl who was Jesus took drink orders, apologized to the crowd that they couldn't have individual food orders because there were simply too many people to cook multiple dishes for, unless they were willing to wait (some of them were, the magical girls had to have their own custom dishes, and all of them were lactose intolerant), and set up silverware before going outside and telling the rest that they might be ready in an hour. These weren't as many from what I could see, so Murugi might be able to cook for them individually. But for right now, she was feeding an army. The girl brought back how many would want a unique meal (as well as their orders for later), and how many were okay with a the set menu. I was getting ready to thank her and leave, but Nevras insisted we stay in case she needed more help. Jesus brought them bread rolls and beer, both of which seemed to appear from nowhere. As far as I saw from near the kitchen, she filled the beer from tap alright, but it was a

water tap, and each person managed to get the beer they wanted most. Then the food was ready, and Murugi started delivering it to tables. She sighed, "Thank you so much for helping..." and turning around to thank the girl in red twintails she instead noticed her own bag of money on the kitchen table. It looked like Murugi was doing okay now, so we gave her a hug, thanked her, and left the building.

After returning by boat, we had a couple of quiet days with not much farming, so I invited Tamashii's friends. Portia was Michael and Lilith's child (though I had later discovered that Michael bore the child because demons couldn't bear children), while Sastraneth was also Lilith's but from Aqorm. Both were girls, but as one was half-elf/half-demon, and the other was half-angel/half-demon, their mindsets were quite different. Sastraneth was like a wild animal, doing whatever she wanted and often saying things that were blunt and could be taken the wrong way. Portia was much quieter and calmer, yet as tempting as it was to think of her as the good friend, she went along on most of Sastra's bad ideas, although many of them could have been worse without Portia. I always had the suspicion that Portia had a small crush of my child, but both of them denied it. "Portia?" Tamashii said once, "Nahh, she's a girl and I'm not into girls aside from being friends. If she were a boy though, yeah I'd marry her in a heartbeat. She's so sweet and thoughtful, I just don't swing that way." Today, Sastraneth's brilliant idea was to teach Tamashii how to wrestle. "You gotta know how to wrestle if you want to be a real man," Sastra explained. Tamashii raised an eyebrow, "You do know we're both girls, right? And preteens?" Sastra made a dismissive hand wave, "Bah, details! Okay, here's how to do a clothesline..." she said as she ran towards my daughter. I grabbed this child mid-stride, "Uhhhh no. You may not look it, but you outweigh Tamashii by quite a bit. That's like a linebacker slamming into a little kid. You can demonstrate the aerial moves and strikes on Portia. She's got a tougher body, and she can take it. And Portia, you can do the pins and holds on Tamashii." With this, the wrestling was a lot more safe. But as I saw them wrestle, I had another vision.

GOD

Events skipped ahead a bit. I'll come back to what happened next later. It's not that it's not important, but just that when Ambrosia was sharing in my visions, she saw what was most relevant, not necessarily what was in order chronologically. So any historians wanting to sort these events, I'm sorry but you're out of luck.

Generations passed, and a man named Abraham and his wife Sarah (at the time they were called Abram and Sarai) were promised by me that they would have many children, even though he was old and she was barren. And she laughed at me, can you believe it?!? And so, when I showed them that I was telling the truth, they wound up naming their child Isaac ("laughter"). So some other stuff happened, and I kinda traumatized Isaac. But he eventually met a good woman named Rebekah who helped him get over things.

Then Isaac had two sons. His firstborn was some hairy brute (Esau) that was probably good in a fight but who I didn't particularly want to be a forefather of Judaism. I could have sent some kind of dream to Rebekah or Isaac telling them to switch heirs. But primogeniture was very much a thing, and Rebekah needed no encouragement to decide that Jacob was her favorite child, as he was domestic and very handy. So she schemed to help him steal inheritance from his brother. Since Isaac was now blind, she dressed Jacob in a fur suit and gave him some meat to take to his father the day that he was prepared to give his blessing. Before that, Esau had traded away his birthright for a bowl of soup, because he was hungry (and kind of a careless twit). Jacob had to run away, and eventually met and married his two wives. As it was time to go home, things got a little weird.

I mean, it's not often you just find yourself wrestling with someone. All this time, Jacob was struggling. He was struggling with his brother. He was struggling to win his father's approval. He was struggling for a wife and property. And now, that night he was alone. Until someone wrestled with him.

JESUS

I have a confession to make. It wasn't an angel that was wrestling with Jacob. Nor was it a regular man. I decided to wrestle with him, because that night he was deciding how to make up with his brother.

As he was wrestling with issues, I started wrestling with him. I came up behind him and tried to put him in a sleeper hold. Without asking me for an explanation (it's strange behavior to suddenly start wrestling someone), he turned his head down and to the right, and performed an illegal maneuver below the belt. I flinched for a few seconds, and he grabbed near my right arm, and performed a spider twist. I slipped under him, and simply lurched back, toppling him over toward the ground. While he was on the ground, I performed a diving elbow drop. I was going to walk away, having caused him some pain, and sure that he would stop bothering his brother Esau now, when he got up abruptly pile-drived (drove?) me from the back. At this point I was a bit miffed, though I decided to turn the other cheek. It was only wrestling after all.

I got him in an arm hold, then he twisted out, and tried to wrestle me to the ground, but then I countered by pushing him off balance with my legs. Both of us got up, but I knocked him down again with a clothesline. It was dragging on from the night into the morning, as her kept trying to keep me from leaving, while I was determined to defeat him and get him to go back to his brother and apologize. Doing so would require that he be completely subjugated. He grabbed around my neck in a choke-hold, but I twisted my torso and now had his arm in an awkward position. He managed to twist out of that hold, but I now had one arm behind his back, and was about to throw him, until I noticed he had me in a headlock. I twisted his arm up, but then he grabbed my leg in a trip. I twisted over him, but then he grabbed my arm and pulled it behind my back. I leaned over and threw him. He got up and lunged into me in a midair clothesline, and while got up, he was going to try again. I wisely ducked, and he slammed into some nearby ropes. Rachel had made some fencing for our sheep, which bleated nearby at the spectacle. I got behind him and performed an arm bar while I grabbed his chin. He flailed with his fists, before I let him go. The next several hours, we were adjusting various holds, trying to get the other to just submit. I almost had him on the ground a couple times, but then he moved a shoulder, or pushed me off. Likewise, he tried a couple of holds, like the crucifix pin, but

I wriggled out and reversed it. We were both very tired, so finally I told him, "Let me go already! It's getting towards morning, and I have places I need to be." He shook his head, grabbing me in a leg hold, "No way! I want a blessing." I tried to wriggle out, but he managed to grab both of my arms.

Jesus. He had gotten a blessing from his brother and his father, what more did he need? Oh alright, "Your name, it's Jacob, right?" He looked surprised but nodded, "Yes, that's right." I continued, "Alright, now you will be called Israel, because you have wrestled with God (and men), and you're doing okay." He looked at me, then asked, "Wait, before you go, tell me your name?" I shook my head, "Why do I need to tell you my name?"

I got out of his leg hold by cheating, I'll admit. Using a move that wasn't part of wrestling industry conventions, I simply switched places with him, so that now he had is leg held, and both of his arms grabbed. "Wait," he asked, "How did you do that?" I moved my arm, and with a deft open-handed thrust, I dislocated his hip. From then on, he would have bit of a limp. I thought about explaining that I Am part of humanity and they are part of me, and that whatever you decide to do to others, you risk happening to you. Instead, I said, "Kayfabe," referencing the tendency of wrestlers not to hurt each other because the outcome is largely ordained anyway. As expected, he was completely baffled by this, but that term passed through several ages of Earth's history where ideas were lost, making its way ultimately to Oxford English Dictionary when describing wrestling. But this wrestling match here had been totally real.

NEVRAS

"Alright, enough already!" I said as I had to separate Portia and Tamashii. Portia was on top of Tamashii, close enough to kiss, and her thighs were wrapped around Tamashii's legs. I didn't break things up because Tamashii was going to get hurt. I broke them up because this looked a little bit risque and I didn't want Tamashii to figure out that Portia was infatuated with her, until I was sure that Portia would not get her feelings badly hurt if Tamashii didn't yet feel the same. "Did Lilith teach you that maneuver?" I asked Portia. She nodded

sheepishly. Secondary to protecting Portia from hard feelings was the idea of not exposing children to sex too soon, I suppose. But I didn't tell Tamashii any of this. Instead, I told Tamashii that her legs could have been crushed, and there shouldn't be so much rough-housing for awhile. Portia knew what I meant, so did Ambrosia, and I'm fairly certain Sastra knew what was up too. But I'm pretty such that as brilliant as my child is, short of reading my mind just then, she had no idea what I was doing. Kayfabe.

Chapter 5

In which Tamashii picks up a multicolored outfit

TAMASHII

Years had passed, and I was an adult. Mother had given me a shopping allowance for my birthday, and this coupled with my earnings meant that I could buy something nice.

Opening was no place to shop for fine clothing, nor was Shoten unless you wanted priestly robes. Ghobli was better, but we had shopped there too much as it was a fairly close journey. Now I had earned my own boat, and so I unfurled my sails and headed east with my friends. The New Earth had an East Pole and West Pole, the latter near a dragon's lair and the Council HQ while the former was contained in the entire Eastern Continent, which in turn included the towns of Kirin and Kushiyama. But all Kirin was likely to offer us was fur coats and dresses, as Kirin was constantly coated in several inches of snow and ice. Kushiyama on the other hand had a strong barrier protecting it from the cold, and was an massive walled city with plenty of shops.

Around me, I heard soft music as a busker played the blues. She was talented, but physically average and unfortunately for her, she had to compete with musicians who could imbue runes into what they played and sang, causing powerful vibrations in their songs that drew audiences. Nearby, the cafes and bars were open, and there were all sorts of diverse city people. Not that there's anything wrong with that. But I soon grew bored with the club scene, and besides which, I came for the shopping. And so, I turned down the side alley, walked two blocks and turned right. The street was appropriately named Cost

Ave, and it was loaded with clothing stores and art shops. Gucci, Prada, Dior, all of the latest fashions straight off the runway. I saw some lovely artwork too, including this lovely painting of Ungorr raising a bloody deer that he had apparently slain with his bare hands with the sunrise in the background. Another painting looked like a manga-style girl except she had a chiseled jaw like a man. A third painting had a girl with purple pigtails and a reddish dress pouring tea, only her face was more like a spider's than a human's, and she kinda sorta had six arms. The last one fascinated me with the sense of being creepy but incredibly cute. I eventually tore my eyes from the shop and browsed the clothing stores instead.

The fashion shops were indeed very expensive, and seemed to be from a very rich neighborhood where people could just throw away money. A restaurant near this shop had a single entree cost roughly 5000 Gold. Now, an exchange rate to currency of the original Earth is hard to gauge because USD and other fiat paper currency was rather stable, but I think the estimate is between 1:1 and 1:50. That is, 5000 Gold could be anywhere from $100 to $5000. This also depends on the region. Phoenix's Gold has more intrinsic worth than Kushiyama's, and so you could actually purchase more if you showed people Gold from Phoenix. They were supposed to be valued the same, but Kushiyama was plagued by corruption and inflation due to bad government.

I'll admit, I was tempted to "see how the other half lives" so to speak. But then I remembered my mother, and how she had learned to be thrifty as a result of being a beggar for much of her adult life. "There is a difference between *cost* and *value*," she said. And she said, "Some people think that things that have prestige because of their price are important. But look at the common people. They shop at thrift, and occasionally they find things that look identical to those nice brands but at a fraction of the price. Isn't there value in wisdom and humility? And aren't these people human beings just as much as the people who call themselves important?" She also explained how many people had economic theories on what causes inflation, but she pointed out examples from history. How some people thought

printing money, government debt, or prosperity led to inflation. Then she pointed to times where more money was printed to keep up with the population but the money had good buying power because production was high and items were readily available, times when the government racked up debt but the regular people were unaffected because they were well employed and not overtaxed, and so on. Then she pointed to Germany after the first World War, and how they basically were a basket-case financially and had a huge debt to pay off. Or Russia under communism, where nobody wanted to produce because everyone was paid evenly whether they worked hard or slacked. Or Zimbabwe when they tried to make farming "just" by getting rid of all the experienced white farmers to make sure only black farmers were working the soil. So she asked me, "What have we learned here?" I guessed, "Uhhh, black people people suck at farming?" She poked me, "Hey you, stop being a troll. No, that's not it at all. It's about industry or more precisely avoiding scarcity. When the US closed the pipeline, and tried to push people into buying electric vehicles, the price of gas increased by a lot. I guess what I'm saying is that the rich in some ways are very poor. They don't know how to save money, they distrust the common people, and they never have enough money because they have chosen to live among other rich and buy things for their cost. If you can, shop where the thrifty rich share a store with the poor. You'll find the best deals of all. Something like that."

I took her advice, darting away from Cost Ave to a small stairwell where I found an underground thrift center. I noticed immediately that there was a wide variety of economic backgrounds among the shoppers, as products were high quality yet cheap. All the effort socialist governments spent trying to impose "equality" and it was as simple as giving them a place to shop together. The wisdom of these governments was truly foolish.

The brands were all authentic, but whereas a Gucci bag or Dior dress might cost 8500 Gold on that street, the same thing was 145 Gold. At a store in Ghobli, a Lilac or Peach Dress might run about 1100 Gold, as Mother remembers from one time she took my father

shopping. But these had elemental properties as they were laced with runes, while their other dresses ranged from 10 to about 75 Gold. I wound up buying a good quality leather handbag with the all the right brand names for like 25 Gold. No, it wasn't a knockoff. It was used once, then its owner decided it just wouldn't do to see them using the same handbag again. And then I bought a fabulous gown for 350 Gold. The dress was dubbed Joseph Jacobson for some reason. It was elegant, the cut was fine, the tasteful style was the ultimate in good design. It was red, green, brown, yellow, purple, white, blue, scarlet, black, ruby, olive, ochre, peach, violet, lilac, gold, cream, crimson, silver, rose, fawn, azure, lemon, russet, gray, chocolate, mauve, pink, and orange. And this is why it caught the eye. A king would stop and stare at it. It was just fabulous to look at, and I have no idea how it sold for so cheap in this thrift store. It was as though it had been set aside.

GOD

Jacob had children through about four women. First, he worked for several years in exchange for a man's daughter's hand in marriage. This daughter Rachel was promised but not delivered by her father Laban, who scammed Jacob into working for several more years. I saw it as fitting that this should happen to him, as he had scammed his own brother and father. Plus, I wanted to get him back for the shame I would later experience from him defeating my son in a wrestling match. And so, instead of Rachel, he got married first to her older sister Leah.

Polygamy is a real mess, as a person can't really keep two or more lovers happy. Oh they claim they can do it in Muslim countries, but I have seen the jealousy and hurt through the eyes of the women that those men "marry". I don't think they care about any of their brides. I admit I helped Jacob's wife Leah out a bit, by making it so Rachel couldn't conceive (at least, not for awhile). And so, Rachel got passed over for awhile, while Jacob gave some loving to her older sister. But then, I saw how miserable Rachel was and I gave her handmaiden some children on her behalf. Then Leah wanted more children, and after that she slowed down so I gave Leah's handmaiden some

children. It was like some nuclear stockpiling deal or something. Finally, Rachel had two children, Joseph and Benjamin. Alas, her second child cost her life. Because Joseph was her firstborn, he was very special to her. And so, he made Joseph a coat of many different colors. Naturally, this created jealousy among them. And the fact that this kid also claimed to have dreams sent by me (he did, but that's beside the point), So one day, they took Joseph along with them, and pushed him into a pit. Despite Joseph supposedly being special and very wise, it was very easy for them to get him to turn aside and look down at the pit while they tossed him in. Later, a trader came by and they sold him into slavery. This was back when slavery was still being done.

Before Egypt was built on Earth's soil, it was around on the Ancient Earth in the island of Pangaea, and its pyramids were far grander and more magnificent that the sandstone structures we see today. 18 years before Tamashii went shopping, Ambrosia and her gang were at Atlantis and happened to spy some flying saucers near the pyramids depicted on stone tablet as history. She also saw images of flying buildings shooting some sort of beam as people at ground level chanted and prayed. No, it's not like you readers think. They weren't aliens. This Ancient Earth was filled with secrets, one of which was the power of thaumaturgy while the other was the prevalence of ancient devices of awesome power. It wasn't that aliens helped humans build the pyramids. These saucers were made right in Ancient Egypt, and while the technology of the Hebrews (I will call them Hebrews to distinguish from modern Judaism) was filled with wandering nomads who depended on my power, the polytheist land of Ancient Egypt had powerful weapons. The pyramids themselves were giant flying fortresses, powered by the prayer and faith of the Egyptians. The power of their faith was indeed impressive, but nothing without my support, as I later showed them. This was a time where Egypt based its entire technology on faith, and after I stripped their powers away, all that remained was memories of their greatness. Today, they are washed out. But at the time, they had not only great power but great cruelty. Joseph was sold as a slave to an official

named Potiphar.

Like many officials, he was of the priest class and thus had powers of thaumaturgy at a time when such abilities were not well known to the lay. He was also captain of the guard, so many of the abilities he had were involved with the waging of war rather than temple responsibilities. He could summon sphinxes and other creatures, use powers of fire or lightning, heal wounds, and form weapons from light. Under his authority, Joseph learned the power of thaumaturgy, the power to work miracles, and his faith in me strengthened his natural gifts as a dreamer. He learned the skills of healing and protection, and his talent for remembering dreams gave him a very strong gift of interpreting dreams. Joseph was eager to learn and helpful to him, and he quickly learned the language of Egypt and was made the chief butler in Potiphar's household. Unfortunately for him, Potiphar's wife was a cougar and wanted some action with young Joseph. "You're trying to seduce me, Miss Potiphar. Aren't you?" Joseph asked, staunchly refusing her advances. Joseph later hooked up with her daughter Asenath, and had two sons named Manasseh and Ephraim, but that's a story for some other time. The important part is right now, Potiphar's wife claimed that Joseph raped her. And as you know, all claims of molestation of women must be believed, even when they aren't true. And so, Joseph was put into prison.

While in prison, he sang this song while a bunch of children stood around him. It was unclear to me what they doing there.

Close every door to me,
Hide all the world from me
Bar all the windows
And shut out the light.
Do what you want with me,
Hate me and laugh at me
Darken my daytime
And torture my night.
If my life were important,
I would ask will I live or die
But I know the answers lie

Far from this world
Close every door to me,
Keep those I love from me
Children of Israel
Are never alone
For I know I shall find
My own peace of mind
For I have been promised
A land of my own

He also sung this song, while he planted a beat up tree. By the time he had finished the song montage, the plant had fully grown and bore fruit.

I thought I did what's right
I thought I had the answers
I thought I chose the surest road, but that road brought me here
So I put up a fight
And told you how to help me
Now just when I have given up, the truth is coming clear

You know better than I
You know the way
I've let go the need to know why
For You know better than I

If this has been a test I cannot see the reason
But maybe knowing "I don't know" is part of getting through
I tried to do what's best but faith has made it easy
To see the best thing I can do Is to put my trust in You

For You know better than I
You know the way
I've let go the need to know why
For You know better than I

I saw one cloud and thought it was a sky

I saw a bird and thought that I could follow
But it was You who taught that bird to fly
If I let You reach me will You teach me?

For You know better than I
You know the way
I've let go the need to know why
I'll take what answers You supply
You know better than I

But it wasn't all show tunes either. He also encountered two fellow prisoners. One was a baker and the other was a cupbearer, and both had worked under Pharaoh before having displeased him. But Joseph explained, "God has given me a gift to dream, and I believe I can interpret yours. Tell me of your dreams." The cupbearer started first, "Okay, so this is what I saw in my dream. I saw a grapevine in front of me. The vine had three branches that began to bud and blossom, and soon it produced clusters of ripe grapes. I was holding Pharaoh's wine cup in my hand, so I took a cluster of grapes and squeezed the juice into the cup. Then I placed the cup in Pharaoh's hand." Joseph explained, "This means that in three days you will return to Pharaoh's side and have your job back." Next the back asked, "What about me? In my dream there were three baskets of white pastries stacked on my head. The top basket contained all kinds of pastries for Pharaoh, but the birds came and ate them from the basket on my head." Joseph groaned, "I'm not sure that's the type of dream you'd want. In three days, that head of yours is gonna be food for the crows." He shuddered. Anyway, it happened just like he said, and as the cupbearer was leaving prison, Joseph screamed, "Tell Pharaoh about me so he'll let me out!" But the man forgot, and years passed. Then Pharaoh himself had a dream. He asked his thaumaturgists to decipher his dream, but as powerful as they were, able to move the pyramids themselves and activate their weapons, they were hopeless to interpret his dreams and could only give guesses. He sent for prophets and seers, and even searched the land for a Sage. But there were no Sages in Egypt. The cupbearer remembered and told Pharaoh, "I remember

when I was in prison, there was a man there named Joseph and he interpreted our dreams." Pharaoh ordered his subordinates to send for Joseph, and told him this dream, "I've been having these strange dreams. Day in, day out, always the same dreams. In one dream, there are seven healthy ears of grain, only for seven grains withered by the east wind swallowed them up. In another, the same happens to cattle, having fat shiny cattle eaten by lean hungry cows. But the cows stay lean." Joseph told him, "These dreams are both the same. You will have seven years of good harvest. Then an east wind will cause the plants and animals to wither and die. You will need to set aside grain for crops and for seed, do the same with meat and new calves. You will need to set up a royal granary for distribution, and someone in charge of it..." And this point, he faltered, as Pharaoh pointed to him. Pharaoh's servants quickly proceeded to dress him in fine robes and ornament him with necklaces and bracelets of gold and gems. Joseph followed through with his plan, using the skills her learned from Potiphar to manage the household and keep inventory to now manage the supplies of an entire kingdom, as well as feeding lands beyond. For you see, this famine spread to nearby countries as well.

Later, Joseph's brothers came to that land, hoping to get some supplies. He treated them well and gave them extra grain, but decided to prank them in order to get them to bring the rest of the family, accusing them of stealing and locking them in prison. He only agreed to let them go when they brought their youngest Benjamin. After all this, they begged and pleaded for mercy. Long ago, Joseph had a dream of sheaves of grain and even the stars bowing to him. There were twelve of them in the dream, representing his twelve brothers (apparently his sisters didn't count). His family didn't recognize him at first because his head is shaved in the manner of the Egyptians and he was dressed in fine clothes, but when he admitted who he was, it was like a veil was lifted from their eyes. Their family reunited, the people of Jacob lived in Egypt for generations. Only, those newer generations didn't live as long as Jacob or even Joseph.

But there was more to this story. You see, wind, even a dry wind

doesn't keep crops withered for seven years. Nor does it diminish the lifespan of humanity. Nor does wind cause cows to look sickly, not on its own anyway. No, what does that is fallout. It all started with something that happened in the east. Specifically, the land of Ancient India. The Pandava and Kaurava families were at war with each other. Normally, this would be just a family feud like the Hatfields and the McCoys, but these were nobility with their own armies and everything. And so they fought a long and drawn out war that unfortunately was made all the worse for the fact that they had powers of magic and thaumaturgy. Even worse, a demon named Belial had taught them a destructive power of nuclear resonance, the power of fission. They called this power *Brahmastra* or literally the "weapon of God." But I *didn't* give them this weapon. My intention for thaumaturgy was to use it for spiritual growth and healing, or at the very least the balanced power of magic. But because Belial saw thaumaturgy as a future threat, such power had been polluted into destructive sorcery. The arrow shown like a second sun, and threatened to turn the world into a desert. But at the last second, both families decided not to blow all of humanity to dust. It was a wise decision made by their better impulses, but unfortunately the radiation that was leaked due to such a weapon was enough to plunge the world into seven years of famine. A nuclear winter, though not the one it could have been. Now you know.

Future generations only had the power of thaumaturgy and magic very rarely, as I had set wisdom as a prerequisite for such power. It was too dangerous for foolish people who wanted to involve themselves in great wars. After all, wars do not make one great.

In any case, generations passed and an entire tribe of people had moved to Egypt. And it was all because of a really nice coat. I was glad when I reserved that dress for Tamashii, that she was an only child.

Chapter 6

In which torches and pitchforks are the weapon of choice

AMBROSIA

Tamashii always had psionic abilities, and she could usually control

them pretty well. But the same isn't true of situations of duress. My kid said that a boy named Gruumsh had been teasing her. He called her tomboy and other interesting names, most of which didn't have the same effect on her because it didn't hit home. She was already tense from being bullied, but then he tried to pound at her with his fists. At that point, she flinched and formed a barrier. From that point onward, the kids called her a freak and tried to gang up on her at every opportunity. Most of it was teasing, but Gruumsh and his friends Loony, Moe, and Cretin were threatened by her power and like dumb bullies everywhere, tried to get her to use it even though it was inherently dangerous to them if she lost control. You see, there is a mentality behind bullying that isn't readily obvious. They tend to pick people to bully who are standing alone. This is because in their misguided way, they are trying to make friends. Most bullies have a dysfunctional home life. Either their parents think "My child would never do something like this" and have a vaguely positive but mostly aloof experience with parents, or they have shitty parents that in turn bully them. It's like the Oracle of Death taught me about the Chain of Harm, bullying is a way of forming an outlet from stresses at the home life by transferring them to another person. Tamashii was an effective brick wall that they could take out their frustrations on. Unlike the other kids, she wasn't emotionally fragile so teasing didn't work, and she had a shield so there was no proof they hit her. I trusted my child, but I wanted to see just how bad it was, so I hid and watched her as she got bullied one day.

But I picked a bad day to watch, as after they hit her shield a few times, I rushed over and screamed, "You take your hands off of my daughter!" Noticing me, they taunted, "Look, she even got her mommy involved. What a wimp!" Tamashii didn't mind their teasing, but then the subject turned to me as their voices overlapped, "Weird blue hair... And she always wears that stupid brown dress and apron... I heard she defeated Belial, now look at her, threatening innocent kids... Your mamma is so fat..." At about the point they resorted to your mamma jokes, Tamashii lost it, "I don't care what you say to me, but ***don't you dare*** insult my mother!" She burned one of them with

Soulfire, and another two got hit by rocks that she tossed at them with telekinesis. The last Cretin ran away.

Soulfire doesn't just cause burns to the body, it damages the psyche. As Gruumsh healed, he was traumatized, staring out into space and gently rocking himself for comfort. As for the others, the rocks left nasty bruises that they could show to parents. Even Cretin faked an injury for sympathy.

And so, their parents were like, "You hurt my precious child! He had never done anything to anyone deserving of this." And they told their friends, and a large group of parents started carrying torches and pitchforks. We moved at this point from the outskirts of Opening to closer to Phoenix.

BELIAL

Pitchforks. That is how your kind always portrayed us, tormenting the dead all eternity. Or that we sit around tempting puny mortals. But that isn't truly how things are. I moved from town to town attempting to join in on affairs. Demons need love too. But they perpetually drove me out, calling me soulless or a Monster. And since many of the smaller towns were rural, they often prodded me with forks like I was a bale of hay. Unlike a bale of hay, demons are made of sterner stuff, and I wasn't actually hurt. But their rejection certainly hurt.

And of course, then everyone seemed to be learning how to use thaumaturgy. I had tried to disguise my form and to live in the cities, but this new gift of theirs burned my disguise and burned at my flesh. Back then, most of the demons didn't have souls as they were born from the darkness of the Seraphim, beings linked to the angels that were also split away. But I was a natural demon, having started as a Seraphim and then turned dark, unlike the others who were only that way due to mingling with humans. So I knew what it was to be in the presence of God, to love others and have companionship. And I missed it, but with my horrid and tainted flesh, none would love me anymore. I was sure that I was unlovable, and so I made no attempt to do any kind acts to change anyone's minds about me. Instead, I hid among them, and when they used thaumaturgy to light a room or

conjure a cup of coffee, my outer form burned off. I was once again driven away. Worse, while I managed to get God to make people forget about magic for quite awhile, later everyone was taught how to use such power. With each new child born who could use the power of light and love, it felt like an extra irritation, and all of this ambient energy was beginning to hurt me. But I would have my revenge. I hatched a plan to do away with these pesky humans.

Yes I admit it. I caused millions of years of human suffering. But you see, they deserved it. They rejected me.

MOSES

I saw a flame like a torch off in the distance, and noticed it was a bush burning. I turned aside to see this sight, for no matter how long it burned, it was never consumed.

Let's back up a bit. Joseph's family had children, and their children had children of their own in Egypt. But as time passed, the Pharaoh in Egypt lost all memory of Joseph and his people. They went from honored guests to immigrants to unwelcome immigrants who needed work to slaves used for architecture. The Egyptians had lost the methods of making mobile fortresses, and the priests no longer had to power to use them, for there were none of power except for a tiny group who knew petty magic. Only the legends spoke of a time where people could use the pyramids and temples. The priests could do cheap tricks like blessings and curses, and minor transformations and illusions. And the pyramids and temples that were built were no longer powerful structures but cheap imitations made of sandstone and temples containing no real power.

There's a funny thing about power. When people no longer have true power, they act like tyrants. And so, when the nations lost divine favor, they responded using politics to bully the citizens. Specifically, this big construction project which was meant as a vanity project for Rameses. But in my childhood, Pharaoh decided there were too many of us, and starting killing off the Hebrew people.

We later had religious laws against abortion, against the sacrifice of children. And this was why, because their children were killed by Pharaoh by the thousands. Yet I escaped such punishment despite the

fact that my basket floated right to doorstep of Pharaoh's own relatives.

GOD

There have been many experiments with nature vs nurture, but suffice it to say, neither one is wholly true. You can raise a child from infancy to believe certain things, but cognitive dissonance can eventually break through, and the child may come to reject what they have always known. For example, one doctor tried to raise a male child as a girl, only to have the child commit suicide. Likewise, the belief that genes determine everything is likewise false, or we could create clones that would all dutifully follow the will of the state. What is mentioned in neither of these tests is the existence of a soul. From twin studies, this is rather clear. Two twins may identify either with other, or they may attempt to be different. This is not nature or nurture but the fact that genetics or upbringing doesn't rule the human soul. We all can make choices.

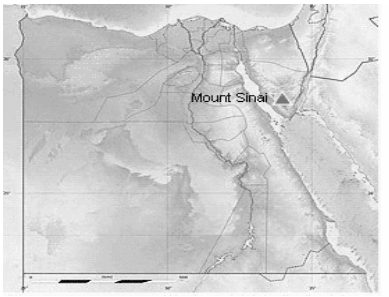
But this isn't the experiment I'm wanting to talk about. Instead, there was an experiment known as the Milgram experiment, where electric shocks were given to people, up to a fatal dose. In reality, these were actors, and never in any harm. The experiment was framed as some learning experiment, but it was a test of obedience to violent authority. However, variations of this experiment found that people were only 30% likely to continue when they could see and touch the person. This is why it was fine for Pharaoh to kill kids from afar, but when a Hebrew child was in front of them, Pharaoh and his children couldn't be so cruel.

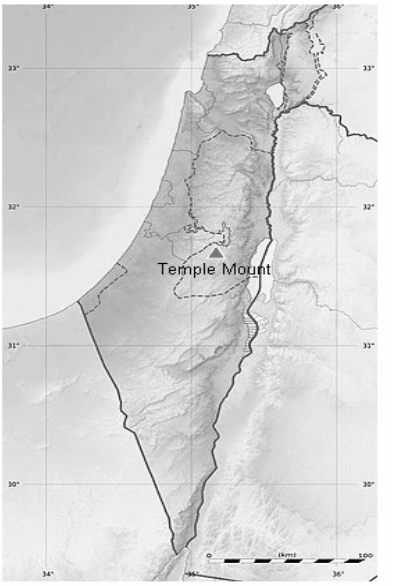
MOSES

My parents raised me as a child of the Pharaoh, and I never knew my background, even though my natural mother was my nursemaid. I helped oversee the building of the monuments of Rameses, until one day when I saw a master beating a Hebrew, and I killed him. Fearing my crime would be discovered, I fled to the people of Midian (a tribe, not a location), married a woman named Tzipora, and helped them with sheep and goat farming until one day, I saw a light on the mountain of Sinai.

GOD

Sinai, Hebron, and Horeb are all the same place, I think. The Jews of today conflate Hebron with an area in the West Bank, and claim that an area in Jerusalem known as the Temple Mount was the most sacred spot. But take a look at these maps.





Israel's Temple Mount is on the right, and Sinai is just outside the main part of Egypt on the left. Even though land moved substantially, and the Ancient Earth had all of this take place on Pangaea, these were not even remotely the same locations. I intended the Hebrews to make a pilgrimage to Sinai to a Temple there. Instead, all of their sacrifices and worship involve a spot in Israel, where they claim Isaac was almost sacrificed, before I provided an animal. Then they bitterly feuded with their brothers, the Samarians, claiming that I only favored the Jews. Don't you think I would have known who the Hebrews were? Yet Absalom also confused the significance of a holy place with worship of God. And so I did away with the requirement for a location to worship. I said, "True worshipers will worship not in the mountain nor the temple, but in spirit and in truth."

MOSES

I looked at the light, and noticed a bush was burning, so I tethered my livestock, and turned aside to look at it. I walked up the mountain

path and had nearly approached the bush when I heard a still small voice, *Moses! Moses!* And so I said, "Here I am." And God told me to take off my shoes because I was standing on holy ground. Then he said, *I am the God of your ancestor, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob.* I hid my face, because I was afraid to look at God

God said, *I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt. I have heard them crying out because of their slave drivers, and I am concerned about their suffering. So I have come down to rescue them from the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land into a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey—the home of the Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, Perizzites, Hivites, and Jebusites. And now the cry of the Israelites has reached me, and I have seen the way the Egyptians are oppressing them. So now, go. I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people the Israelites out of Egypt.* But I asked God, "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?" But God said, *I will be with you. And this will be the sign to you that it is I who have sent you: When you have brought the people out of Egypt, you will worship God on this mountain*. I asked God, "Suppose I go to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' Then what shall I tell them?" He said, *I Am who I Am. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: 'I Am has sent me to you.'* That wasn't a real answer, but I wasn't about to quibble with God.

So I took my wife and sons, put everyone on a donkey and started toward Egypt. We were staying at an inn, when God suddenly threatened to kill me. But Tzipora performed a circumcision of my children, when her people had been Midianites, worshipers of Baal. These same people led our people astray, getting them to worship other gods or sacrifice children. She represented the very thing that God hated about Pharaoh (child murder), but when Tzipora pledged to circumcise them, she was pledging that my children and her would be our people, not theirs.

Anyway, after that, God let us finish our journey, and we went to Pharaoh telling him, "Let my people go!" He refused, and so I

showed him the thaumaturgy that God had given me, transforming a staff I held in my hand into a living snake. Sorcery looked more impressive in the physical world, but here was a clear difference in what we could do. Pharaoh's court sorcerers held ceremonial staffs created by solidified runes. They were enchanted to be solid, and they had complete freedom in how they appeared and behaved. For example, if a priest needed to cut someone up because they were worshiping Set in a temple of Osiris, they could turn their staff into a sword. It was a handy trick, and yes, the runes could cut as sharply as any sword. But the snake that these sorcerers turned their staves into weren't real. My snake bit each former staff apart, breaking down the runes with a loud crunching sound. They were disarmed, and rather terrified, but Pharaoh Rameses, not understanding magical theory and just how impressive a feat this was, looked bored. He refused to let my people go.

And so, I asked God for help, and God performed plagues while I and Rameses sang show tunes from *Prince of Egypt*. What? It was a hit movie, and I wasn't wasting this opportunity. The seas turned to blood, and though the sorcerers did such a trick on smaller pools of water, yet their trick was just a red powder, like that Kool-Aid stuff that God keeps telling me about. *Oh Yeahhh*, he says. Then frogs came, various biting insects appeared, animals died, flies appeared, boils appeared even on the sorcerers, the same ones who tried to turn water into blood and make their staves turn into snakes. Pharaoh still wouldn't submit. God brought thunder and hail against them to ruin their crops, and even locusts ate what remained. Whenever Pharaoh Rameses repented, God swept away the plague, but whenever he hardened his heart, God brought another plague. Then came darkness and finally the death of the firstborn.

GOD

Some scientists like to assume that all of these plagues are the same one, as a sort of "disproof" that I did them. They say that dinoflagellates in the water formed, which caused frogs to flee, and biting insects like lice and mosquito to breed in the stagnant water, which in turn caused the cows to die, and flies to horde around them,

all which carried disease that created boils on the skin, they burned the dead animals and the smoke created an environmental disaster that made hail and darkness. In turn, this woke up the locusts, who devoured most of the rest of the crops. I have heard that the firstborn of each household was the one to pick the grain and thus the first to die if grain was tainted. But that's not quite the cause of death.

Hold up, so dinoflagellates just randomly polluted a river surrounding a great city at the exact point in time when Hebrews were wanting to leave Ancient Egypt? And all of these things just snowballed into a great disaster by chance? Right... That would be like saying that a Rube Goldberg device started itself. Yes, it was a chain reaction. But no, it did have a cause. Me. Rather than being a disproof, this only proves that I control the natural world.

In actual fact, these science theories are correct, just not the notion that they were self-caused. They were indeed a chain reaction that rained several consequences down on the Egyptians, and it was only the fact that the Hebrews lived differently that they were spared such problems. The "blood" in the water was indeed an algal blood caused by dinoflagellates, which in turn caused respiratory issues for the people living near the water. The frogs naturally left the water, as the water was too polluted for them. Frogs carry *salmonella*, as a side note. Next were biting insects, which included mosquitoes which carried West Nile Virus, as well as lice which carried *Yersinia pestis* (bubonic plague). Rinderpest would have resulted in the deaths of livestock. These boils that came next formed as a result of smallpox. The hail and thunder was a result of chaotic weather formed by a nearby eruption in Santorini of Crete, which rained down on livestock, people, and trees but spared Goshen where the Hebrews lived. This eruption in turn caused thick darkness and higher humidity, as well as an increase of locusts. As for the last one, it was believed by scientists to have been mycotoxins from the tainted water that affected the children first, and it in turn would have been passed along when bread fermented and baked. But here, I arranged my Reaper known as Yomi to ensure that the firstborn and *only* the firstborn died from this, no matter their age.

As you can see, I managed to infect the people of Ancient Egypt with a laundry list of disease, showing my intense displeasure at the way they had treated the Hebrews. I also showed my protection, as I spared the Hebrews by placing them away from the epicenter of this disease, and by introducing them to good health practices in the way they ate their food. Dry unleavened bread so that all the tainted water was cooked out. Similarly, dry roasted lamb which was not allowed to develop any spoilage the next day. The bitter herbs had some medicinal value. One of them was *tamcha* in Hebrew (also known as Queen Anne's lace) which protects against fungal activity. *`Ulshin* or chicory is one of 38 flowers used to prepare Bach flower remedies, as well as reducing intestinal parasites. *Harhavina* is field eryngo, a wild plant that can be used to treat kidney inflammation. Lastly, they ate a bitter herb that was a native dandelion used as a cathartic and antidiarrheal. The wine they drank at the feast was important because the water was tainted, and because alcohol has a number of antibacterial properties. Lastly, even the blood on the door was spread by hyssop, and antimicrobial. So while the Egyptians were suffering from boils, salmonella, and unending diarrhea, the Hebrews were spared.

I suppose I could tell the story of the next forty years but it's boring. I provided them with food from the birds and manna (a type of honeydew from the Turkey oak produced by aphids), but they claimed bitterly about about it, and more than a few of them were punished. Some were killed by having more bird than they could stand after complaining about the manna, some were bitten by snakes. And then there was the time that I gave them my laws only for Moses to get mad as they immediately broke them. As I say, nothing really interesting happened during this period. And got them lost for 40 years. The main point is that a lot of the Hebrew got to safety, I parted the water and took care of their enemies, and I led them to a new land. I think we can forget all those other things.

Chapter 7

In which Tamashii's family decides to visit her grandparents

AMBROSIA

As you might imagine, around this time, we decided to take our stuff and move. It was actually pretty easy to do so. There was no moving van, no repeated trips with luggage shoved into a vehicle, and no big event to it. We shoved everything we wanted moved into the house, the moved performed a Magic Expanding Grow spell to shrink it to the size of a MicroMachine, roughly 2cm across. I asked the mover why this was called this as it shrunk rather than grew, and he explained toy history and how these toys were designed so that they'd grow if you just add water. But then they would be recalled because stupid mothers would buy them for kids while they were teething and they would expand inside their body.

The mover named Kineo also mentioned he would be glad to go with us in order to ensure that nothing could happen to this house while we moved it, for some additional money. When we refused, he scowled a bit but understood. "Okay then," Kineo said, "you'll need to do the following to finish your move. First, you'll need to either hire a spellcaster to perform a Momentum Nullification spell, or take extreme care to have no china or glass or other fragile things in the house. You'll have to keep the house perfectly upright in a swaying and rocking boat. Of course, for a bit extra, I can cast..." I shoved money in his hand, and he nodded, "That's what I thought." He concentrated, and muttered something, and the house glowed for a second then went back to normal.

"Alright, this spell is tied to the other spell, so when it goes back to full size, you will be able to move objects again," he explained, "Now, the spell is designed so that when you add water, it will grow back to full size. So while on the boat, be sure not to expose the house here to *any liquids* not even a drop of whiskey or some tea. Not unless you want the house to expand, crush every one of you, and smash up the boat." He kept angling to sell us waterproof bags at huge markup or to go with us. I shook my head again. He was about to suggest some premium package when he got a call on his cellphone. "Oh hey, Gloria, I'm about done here and heading home to you. ...What do you mean, *don't bother coming back*?!? I paid the mortgage while you raised the kids. I work here every day to make enough to support you.

...That was one time!!! I didn't even kiss her! And I've spent the last five years apologizing, and working to make you enough to live comfortably. ...Yes, I suppose maybe you should leave if that's the way you feel. ...Hey, you can't take that, I **earned** that!" I only heard half the conversation, but afterwards his face had fallen. He no longer seemed to have the urge to wrangle more money out of us. Seeing that maybe he needed to be away from home for awhile, I changed my mind. "On second thought, we might need someone to keep our house safe while we make this boat trip. Welcome aboard!" He protested, but I dragged him aboard our ship, effectively kidnapping him in order to take his mind off of what was all too obviously marital problems. Under intense interrogation involving a big rice bowl of spicy garlic leek chicken, he cracked, and told us all the sordid details.

Once, she had been beautiful and kind, but over time as he had worked so that she could get nice things, the marriage had soured. He had two boys and was just about to have a girl when the job became more intense. He was making six figures as the vice president of a worldwide company, but the house payments and all the wasted food and clothing meant that he was working even harder while she just shopped the money away. Eventually, he downsized his business, becoming an entrepreneur and ran his own local moving company. He was away from home a lot, and his wife apparently caught him hanging out at the bar when she called. To be honest, he was just talking, as his life was pretty lonely and he didn't get to see her until he got back home. She got jealous and insisted that he was having an affair, as she heard the voice of a woman sitting next to him. He wasn't perfect, but he had spent the next several years working harder than he wanted and trying to make things up to her. But even when he tried to do things romantic since as treating her to dates, she kept bringing up old injustices. Today, he was calling her as when he got home, he wanted to spend time with her, but she was breaking up the marriage, selling the house, and taking the children, dog, and most of his stuff.

Obviously, she didn't have a right to that, not for just talking to another woman when he was lonely. So I showed him Elias's card.

Elias had read up on law (along with everything else) and had become ordained as a priest in the Ministry of Justice. Since the Council, state-appointed legal help was not a thing. So the temples and churches got together and created a system for hearing out legal grievances, ordaining priests to do freelance legal work. So anyway, Elias had worked through all the steps, and knew his stuff. We sailed our ship to a location in Phoenix, Kineo quickly set the tiny building down before the rains came down and made it full size, and we made a return trip to settle this while Nevras and Tamashii unpacked. I found Elias with his nose in a book again, and explained the situation to him. "Let me see the marriage contract," he requested, and quickly began to read it aloud.

MARRIAGE PRENUPTIAL CONTRACT

The consenting party, known as Kineo Steinem, agrees to a marriage where no assets of his wife Gloria are available to him if this marriage shall terminate, under any circumstances, including attempted murder on her part, infidelity, rape, abuse, or other issues. Should either of them terminate the marriage, a "no-fault" clause has been added to all her assets, and she is not considered at fault for any failure in their marriage. The consenting party Kineo agrees that if he should so much as look or talk to another woman he is held fully liable for adultery, if he says an angry word he is liable for abuse and attempted murder. Any children produced by the marriage that she does not want are considered a rape on his part. Any failure of the consenting party to avoid rape, abuse, infidelity, or attempted murder constitutes a failure of the marriage on his part, and full custody of any money, children, pets, or property are by law due to her. The marriage may be terminated by Gloria at any time for any reason. The consenting party has no bargaining power in terms of adjusting the contract. As a male, he is by definition in full knowledge of anything that he did, and accountable to the full extent of the law, including jail time for perceived adultery.

He finished reading, and smiled. "Good news," he said, "this is an unconscionable document. Did you agree to it under duress?" He

shook his head, "She gave me this contract with just the signature line showing and the words that it was a prenup. She held it like this the whole time," and he showed his hands holding the center so that none of it could actually be read. Elias nodded, "So you signed it without ever being able to see what was in it? Let me guess, she wouldn't agree to the marriage until you agreed to the prenuptial?" He nodded repeatedly, "Yes, I think I can work with this." Lawyers would debate with other lawyers in front of a judge if it came to that, or settle out of court. But they had another power granted known as *sigillum advocatus sacerdos*, of the "stamp of the lawyer priest." A lawyer could independently decide to rule on a given contract as though they were a judge. And so he stamped

UNCONSCIONABLE

SIGNED WITHOUT KNOWLEDGE AND UNDER DURESS
THIS PRENUPTIAL CONTRACT IS NULL AND VOID

in ink with a stamp. The stamp itself was smooth and blank, it was a stamp pad that conformed to the motion of runes, allowing a skilled lawyer to reshape the pad to hold the ink however they wished, even allowing embossing. The text glowed grey, and Elias explained, "Divorce is not final. You may make up with her, or conclude any divorce proceedings you wish. But this contract no longer applies."

With that out of the way, I thanked Elias and returned to my family. Nevras suggested we see his father and mother, now that my dearest daughter and husband had cleared the entire house of boxes. I suddenly appreciated both of them after having seen just how wrong a marriage could go. I told myself that I wouldn't get jealous of Nevras, no matter what happened in the future.

Phoenix as a perpetually rainy archipelago of three large islands, two of which were connected by a strip of land, and the third was connected by an old rope bridge. It for the most part was kept in good repair, but in the years to come, we actually would fight ninjas at the base of this bridge. This bridge always scared me.

Anyway, we made it across the rocking and wobbling bridge that I am honestly surprised I crossed like a million times. I suppose if I

was ever afraid to cross once, I would be unable to cross ever again. So I just pushed past it, ignoring the wobbling and tense feeling that at any moment, a loose or waterlogged board might give way. I trusted King Charis and Queen Victoria of Phoenix. Mostly.

Safe on the other side, it was a fairly short walk to where Nevras's parents had their castle. It was well-maintained with several turrets and archers ready should there be trouble. But there usually wasn't any trouble, and it was a formality. And so, Nevras, Tamashii, and I made our way toward the open gate...

An arrow fired as a warning shot nearly burrowed into Tamashii's foot. I had given her some training heels to get her feet acclimated to formal wear. She was more than a bit of a tomboy, but I wanted her to make a good impression when we visited the king. So she was dressed in a cute black-bloused red dress than poofed out due to layers of fabric underneath. Her shoes were in turn decorate with fabric flowers. The arrow missed her feet by centimeters and instead beheaded one of the flowers. It also appeared to have bolted the front of the shoe to the ground. "Who goes there?!?" said the guard with the overzealous bow finger. Nevras sighed, "Dammit Vicky! Stop hiring new guards that don't even recognize the crown prince!" The archer guard guy requested, "I would like you to show identification proving that you indeed are the crown prince known as Nevrasia Astra Danger Fitz Embor Phoenix III. Otherwise, I will need to ask you to leave the premises."

At this, all of us sighed. Tamashii yelled up at the guard, "He gave all of that stuff up! Anyway, the royal crest was taken by Grandma and Grandpa when my dad abused it." She was referring of course to the ability of the crest to drop bags of money from the royal coffers from the sky to repay royal debts. Not only had we gone on a few shopping sprees in the past, but legitimately used the falling currency as a weapon against creatures.

The archer, being bit of a stubborn jackass, proceeded to shake his head, "I'm sorry, without identification, you'll have to..." Then another voice said, "That's enough, Burro. Stand down, please." My mother-in-law had stepped out onto the veranda, emanating earthly

authority while she looked stylish in a dress. I wished I could pull that off. She faced the man, "We've talked about this. If the gates are opened, don't give people who enter any trouble. Just use the signal alarm to inform people that they are here so we can welcome them with the appropriate escorts or troops. And that's my family. Learn to recognize their faces or you won't last long here."

In any case, after the initial awkward situation, we were welcomed in the front gate. Victoria apologized, "Sorry, it's just been a mess lately. We set up the Council again, but it turns out that we had a lot of turmoil that hadn't been resolved in centuries. We've had to deal with some things, and everyone is on edge."

We entered the castle gate while she stepped inside from the balcony. In order to approach the king and queen required climbing a flight of stairs and going through several rooms, so it took a few minutes to get to an audience with King Charis. As everyone who has studied Phoenix politics knows, Queen Victoria is the actual ruler, while King Charis is only a consort. However, because many other royalties nearby were solely patriarchal, he kept up an act while Vicky quietly whispered her intentions to him in any public appearance. But we were family, and I had discovered this fairly quickly.

"What brings you here, Ambrosia?" Vicky asked, "Have you decided to take me up on that offer to rule in place of my son?" To be honest, I wasn't sure how I was even considered a candidate for the throne, but Phoenix had pretty strange laws of royal succession. As I understood it, Phoenix believed in the divine right of kings. However, unlike kingdoms that assumed that God had verified their succession, they determined fitness by starting with the the oldest heir, and working outward to their children and spouses, even if said spouse was a commoner. That is, they considered a marriage illegitimate not for lacking royal blood or being officially sanctioned but if the candidate was sane, wise, and kind. This ruled out Charis's older brother Mad Prince Igor, who slept and lived in the bell tower performing experiments on pigeons. It ruled out any possibility of a violent tyrant taking power on the grounds that they were usually neither wise nor kind, taking rights from the people who gave them

consent in the first place. And it ruled out people who didn't want the job. Unfortunately, there were more than a few in this position, so finding a new heir might be problematic in the future. There was no regent system, anyone wanting to rule had to take an oath to the people they ruled. Since regents didn't swear, if no leader was found, Phoenix would be without a leader.

I shook my head, "No, Queen Victoria, it's like this..." She smiled, "Call me Mom." I choked up at this. My own mom had given me up for adoption, and I only met her when once when I was older, and she passed on not long after. I explained how when the town discovered Tamashii was a Soulfire with powerful psychic abilities, they came after us with torches and pitchforks. I also explained that we packed our house and moved to the western island of Phoenix. She listened and then took action, "Guards! Write a report of the events in Opening to the bounty office. Tell them send investigators to find the families responsible for this harassment, and issue a poster for their arrest dead or alive. You there, create updated passports showing the identities of these three as Crown Prince Abdicate Nevrasia Fitz Embor III, an alternate photo passport of Crown Princess Abdicate Nevrasia Fitz Embor III, a photo passport of Crown Princess Tamashii Brahman, and Crown Princess Ambrosia Brahman. Inform the citizens of Phoenix that so long as Tamashii lives here, she is not to be harassed for her powers as a Soulfire. Lastly, prepare rooms and a banquet, and invited my friends." The duplicate ID was because Nevras was a known crossdresser and was prone to using either identification.

This is how royalty should behave, they get things done, and do so in order that their guests feel welcome. Within the hour, we were settled in, and enjoying the local cuisine on a large table. There must have been forty or fifty plates of different dishes, and there were almost place settings. Even with everyone in the castle eating, there were seats to spare. Charis tried inviting the families of his friends, but they were all busy with something or other, so he invited basically everyone from the streets, even the poor or lame, until the banquet hall was full. After dinner, we thanked the two royals and slept for a night in the softest bed ever.

GOD

Moses took his people into the lands across from Egypt, parting the seas there. Unfortunately, their whining and complaining frustrated me, so I decided to make them wander for years in their wilderness. As I say, I put them through a lot of crap, and I'd like to say I'm sorry. I'd like to say that, but you know, they were really crappy to me.

Here I was, rescuing them from their enemies, the Egyptians, who for hundreds of years put them into bondage, and all they can say was "They had nice grains and leeks over in Egypt, God obviously wants us to die here." Or "We got any meat up here in the house?" Yes, they talked like bad 90s and 2000s rappers saying stuff like "You all taking stupid pills? Juice me!" if they wanted something to drink. You know, I could have given them barely anything to eat or drink, but they were fed, clothed, and last I noticed, they had gold enough to build idols with. Don't think that went unnoticed. No sooner were they free than they wanted march straight back into the hands of their oppressors, probably to work several more years in the mud, making bricks without straw.

In addition to giving them food and their children something to wear, I gave them water from a rock. I gave them a set of simple laws. While these laws were being made, I talked with Moses for about forty days. Some of it was to give the law, but most of it was because I enjoyed company with a human. However, they lost faith after waiting that long, and I had to destroy the original Ten Commandments for them. So the second group of Ten Commandments, were coupled with a small list of 613 laws. Moses told the people "God wrote these laws for us." Actually, I told Moses, *These Ten Commandments have I written for the people to follow. They in turn are based on a greater law, that thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind and thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. But the Hebrews you see are even now hardening their heart against you, and against me. Prepare for them, Moses, such laws that they will grow to understand that it is impossible to keep the law. That the law is a curse, and that they who are wise will instead embrace me when I come in the flesh.* Under my advice, he began

to write laws while both of us laughed, noting the ridiculous commands to not eat milk and meat, to not eat pigs, or not weave clothing from multiple fabrics. As though it affected you at all to wear clothing from a certain fiber mix. Further, I made sure they would break the laws by making them contradictory. For example, you are supposed to put the idolatrous to death and stand by as they are dying, but you are not supposed to stand by while someone is dying without helping them. And I told them not to worship idols but then built a large gold container for my commandments decorated with images of Seraphim called the Ark of the Covenant. I was being a huge troll and hoping that some of them were smart enough to get the joke.

After most of the original generation had all died, Moses himself had died, even though the first five books of Torah was supposedly written by him. Ummmm, did you miss the part where Moses dies in Numbers? He couldn't have written that one. And he was too busy wandering around in the desert to write Exodus, Leviticus, and Deuteronomy. And Genesis was before his time. No, he had time enough to write 613 silly laws, but that was it. The only one in the position to write all of Hebrew history was me. And I wrote it through humans so that it might contain errors and require interpretation. In any case, it was up to the younger generation to lead the people of Israel. People like Joshua.

Joshua reached the walls of Jericho, and under my command, marched around it several times while horns blew. The walls fell, but not for the reason you might think. Pulse theory says that the stone walls of Jericho had a large mass but low stiffness, leading to a low natural frequency of the structure. The rams horns and shouting would be too high a frequency to resonate against the wall. But the large number of stamping feet while marching would have produced a shock wave close to natural frequency over a long term. The first six days, it only was an hour of walking to march once around Jericho. But the seventh day, they marched around it seven times. I didn't even have to do anything for Jericho to fall. I simply set up the rules by which sound worked against physical objects, and seven hours of

vibrations did the rest. Well, that, and making it the right frequency to work against the wall.

The problem was, I advised them on the conditions of their victory under the condition that they not take any spoils and raze the area to the ground. I wanted to teach them that religion was about a relationship, not about their selfish needs, but a partnership with me. But some instead wanted to live in this land, to farm and have a roof over their heads, so I turned the tide against them. I showed them that I can just as easily aid their allies if they are unfaithful to me.

In time, they did have a promised land, but I made sure they knew who it was that brought them out of Egypt, who defeated Jericho and their many other enemies, and who would conquer them again through their enemies should they ever lose sight of this.

During the early days of Israel, they ruled through judges and prophets, allowing me to govern them instead of earthly kings. But over time, they wrote propaganda about the nation without official rulers. You see, just as written words can be inspired by me, they can also be written without my permission. Such writings tend to be fiction or nonsense, like a book about a peasant girl with Taoist powers, or about an ancient town destroyed by demons. Such nonsense can either serve God or slowly make one insane. In any case, they told of how without kings in those days, all sorts of awful things could happen.

I rolled my eyes at this. But then they started pleading with the prophets and leaders, "Make us kings like our neighbors." My prophet Samuel in turn griped to me about it, but I said, *Listen to all that the people are saying to you; it is not you they have rejected, but they have rejected me as their king. As they have done from the day I brought them up out of Egypt until this day, forsaking me and serving other gods, so they are doing to you. Now listen to them; but warn them solemnly and let them know what the king who will reign over them will claim as his rights.* So Samuel told them, "Kings will take your land as eminent domain. They will take heavy taxes of your income, and if you don't pay, they might take your property. They will draft your men into the military, and set your women to work making products like perfume

and wine for the royalty. Many of your people will become servants of the king, and some will be used for sex. You will cry to God for help but he will not listen." And yet, none of this had any impact. They demanded a king, because they didn't want to follow me, they wanted to follow the example of other nations.

So I gave them kings, each one worse than the last, until their nation fell. The first of these was Saul. Saul was actually quite decent, but I arbitrarily assigned the law from the times of Jericho that none of the Amalekites could be spared, nor any spoils could be taken. There were two reasons for this rule. First of all, the Amalekites were assholes that kept attacking the Hebrews. But more importantly, Saul spared the Amalekites not out of any want of ransom, as I later had them write about him, but because it was my intention to give them progressively worse leaders, and he was kind-hearted king. I turned my back on him, and Saul desperate as he was to understand why I had left him, turned to a necromancer to summon Samuel's spirit. In written works about David, I held him up as a great king, but actually he was more than a bit of a bastard. He did two major things wrong though. He had an affair and killed another man by setting him up to fall in battle, and he proposed that a temple should be built in Jerusalem. I in turn ordained that his son would build such a temple, a "wise" man. But if he was so wise, why was it said of one of his heirs the his father father made their yoke heavy and they wanted to ask Rehoboam to rule more kindly (but the younger people prevailed)? Solomon was in fact a tyrant with good press. I gave him shrewdness, but this didn't make him kind or rule with justice. He ruined the land of Israel, and his children did far worse, because they forgot the covenant with me. But Solomon did build a temple.

You may ask, what was wrong with a temple? Well, in the days before a temple, the people understood that I traveled with them. The Ark of the Covenant, despite being an idol itself, reminded them that I walked beside them. They kept their relationship with me, and they kept the customs of Passover and Sukkot. Now they had a temple, they decided sacrifices could only be done in certain places. War broke out between north Israel and south Israel. The temple would

also periodically get corrupted with foreign idols, and Israel would get attacked whenever this happened. Despite this, my presence was strong within this temple, and the priests of this time could perform signs. But as time went on, royalty became worse and worse. Unlike the kings of the New Earth, which I have ordained, these kings were asked for. So I intended them to be terrible.

Chapter 8

In which Tamashii ain't afraid of no ghosts

TAMASHII

I occasionally hung out with Mom's friends. I was a precocious child, and many of the human children my own age didn't have much in connection to me. Over the years, I mostly spent time with Sastraneth and Portia, Lilith's children, half siblings from a series of flings with Aqorm and Michael.

But also spent a fair amount of time with Mom's friend. When I wanted to do gardening, practice tai chi, or drink chai tea, Zoe was ready to accommodate me. Lilith taught me to play the pipe organ, gave me some pointers on sex education well before it was appropriate, and taught me how to fight as she had, getting me to stop a boulder. Due to the bodily injuries I received, and the fact that I seemed wary that Lilith might give me more direct pointers about sex, Mom insisted on supervised lessons in pipe organs, and only learning how to push boulders. Lilith assured the both of us that she wasn't in fact a pedophile, but that such techniques were useful if she wanted to have fun with girls or boys her own age. But Mom insisted that she also didn't want her daughter to be a nymphomaniac, so Lilith dropped those lessons. I also learned music from Aqorm, as she had become a professional busker by now, and had big outdoor concerts. I never learned to be as good at music as either of them, but I enjoyed it, and learned to at least play simple tunes. This served me well later in life whenever I went adventuring, as dungeons always seemed to have elaborate musical puzzles. Yes, like in *The Goonies*. Elias spent massive amounts of time in study, having given up a chance for real love with Aqorm because he wanted to learn all there was to know. The two of them were still close friends, but Elias had told Lilith to

"Take good care of her for me."

Michael was typically not that present except when Portia was there. He made sure Portia was safe, as Portia was the first Seraphim in millennia, and more importantly the first to be born as female. Angels before that point had been sexless, able only to change their bodies to mimic sex organs but lacking perfect reproductive systems. As I understood it, the sons of God mated with the daughters of men. After that, in addition to being divided into angels and demons after the flood, their male anatomy basically fired blanks. From what I understood, demons didn't have vital sexual organs, so it was unclear to me how exactly Portia came to be. Or Sastraneth for that matter.

Yazim Jianne and Selqui tended to hang out at a mansion together doing morally depraved experiments. I sometimes checked on them, because Mom said I needed a background in science among other things. But between Yazim Jianne being creepy and the sheer amount of insane laughter, Mom and Dad thought it best to go with me, if only to make sure I didn't wind up as part of his experiments. Currently, Selqui was working on a bike that had floats so it could theoretically be used on land and water. But there were two problems with her invention. The first was that the floats were bulky and couldn't get traction on either surface. The second had to do with the fact that Selqui had to somehow make the bike side-saddle, because the moment her feet hit sea water, they would start to merge, and having metal between her legs as it was trying to coat with seal skin would have made given her some kind of infection. So Yazim Jianne was working with her to make some kind of hand crank device. But now she couldn't keep her balance. We left them as they were working through a series of strange solutions to the problem.

But today, I decided to visit Azrael. Azrael lived in a port town to the northern coast of a continent that was mostly desert, but near the coast was a fertile area. The town of Goji was haunted, as a result of many generations of people having died in the nearby desert, and having the infeasibility of burying people in shifting sands while the hot sun beat over everyone's heads be a major issue to proper rest. Azrael noticed us and waved, "You've come just in time! I'm about to

explore this well. Legend says that it is haunted by a powerful spirit. Wanna go check it out?" I of course agreed, as I was a child, and children liked hanging around in creepy locations. "Of course!" I said.

Azrael's exorcism mostly came from Buddhist and Shinto traditions, and she knew a great deal about spirits and how to banish them. As we climbed down the rungs of the well's ladder, Azrael told me that Buddhism spread from India to China through the help of a stone monkey named Sun Wukong. She also explained that her exorcism technique was not actually Buddhist but mostly Taoist, but that syncretic religions like *Shugendō* (which involved Buddhism) did heavily use such techniques.

At the bottom of the well, I attempted to help Azrael deal with the spirit. Mom stayed at the top of the well, explaining, "I could probably exorcise that spirit for you Tamashii. But I think it's important for you to get experience in battles. Azrael should keep you safe in any case." And so, I tried my hand against it.

My first attempt was to telekinetically throw rocks at it. Obviously, such things phased right through. It used telekinesis to try to throw it back at me, and I flinched as the rocks came towards me. Lilith's training actually did come in handy though as I was at least able to stop the rock's skid towards me as it hit the ground. My hands were bruised though.

I next tried my Soulfire against it. But I was just a kid with no real training, even though this technique could hurt ghosts, I simply made it angry as I injured its spiritual body. Lastly, I tried a pulse of psionic vibrations. This knocked it back, but once again, I was unable to scatter its body or destroy it. The spirit got back up and flew towards me.

Azrael sighed. "*Rin Pyou Tou...*" the ghost froze in midair as though grasped in a vice. "*Sha Kai Jin...*" then, it screamed as Azrael proceeded with nine cutting motions with her index and middle finger, moving across and down as though wielding a sword. "*Retsu Zai Zen*!" the spirit's form began to break down, and it was scattered and sealed. Azrael consoled me, "It actually was pretty good for a first try. It took me years before I was any good at taking care of ghosts." As I

sat in the well, disappointed that I wasn't an instant badass like her, she explained that even Sun Wukong was unable to deal with beings of the supernatural world when he started out. She then told me the story as a way of cheering me up. Well, that, and the fact that most people liked hearing this story as it was one of the earliest fantasy action genre stories in existence.

AZRAEL

I explained the story of Sun Wukong by pulling out Journey to the West and paraphrasing it broadly, only covering the parts I was interested in, "Ages ago, a group of monkeys live upon a mountain of flowers and fruit. The natural world was in such harmony that a large boulder appeared from nowhere. The boulder hatched, and out came a monkey made with a body nearly as strong as stone, and possessing great potential. Now, as you know, abiogenesis is impossible, and things can't arise into order through nothing without supernatural guidance. But this is fiction so..."

Tamashii gave a look that meant I was getting sidetracked, so I returned to topic, "Uhhh right, so anyway, Sun Wukong grew up, and tried to make his tribe of monkeys strong and defend their land from attacks from humans. To this end, he studied under a Taoist master, and learned the ability to somersault along clouds, duplicate himself, and transform his body. Then he left, but was always wanting more power and more glory for himself. He snatched a pole that was holding the heavens in place and used it as a weapon. Unfortunately, this angered the immortals and..."

Tamashii interrupted, "Hold it! **Hold it!!!** Is this going to involve a bunch of long and drawn out battles?" I adjusted my glasses, "Well, yes. This is part of what the audience likes, that's why they read it for over two thousand pages, it's action packed and has lots of fantasy elementals for a novel about Buddhism and Taoism. There's epic fights spanning entire chapters..." She shook her head, "That's what I was afraid of. Yes, I've seen stuff like *Dragon Ball Z* where the Namekian planet is supposed to explode in five minutes, but it gets extended to about eight episodes. And that *One Piece* manga where the Wano Arc went on for 148 whole chapters of artwork, and the

anime went on even longer, despite the fact that entire 30 minute episodes of action were filled by frame by frame motion of fighting. Look, just keep it short. Stick to the main events and try not to storyboard every action. I'm a kid, and I don't have that kind of attention span. At least not yet." I sighed. Ordinarily, most children were helped by reading, and enjoyed action sequences. But Tamashii could read perfectly well, and probably could read my mind too, if she wished it. I suppose if she said she wasn't interested in action, she couldn't be swayed. I remarked, "You're a strange kid, Tamashii. You know that, right?" She nodded, "Yes, I know. But I also know that my mom will scold you if you're gone for hours in this well, so finish up your story."

I leafed through pages and pages of book, trying to summarize without going into detail. "Uhhh right, so Sun Wukong was attacked by the various generals but he was able to defeat them with his pole that held the heavens, his martial arts, and his powers. The various immortals decided to try to trick him, offering him a position as Supervisor of the Imperial Stables to watch after the celestial horses. For a time, he took pride in his work. But eventually, he found out that this was the lowest possible position in the realm of the immortals. At this point, he starts destroying the place, stealing peaches of immortality, and so on. But then the immortal armies chase him around, and he winds up getting put into a Five Elements Refinement furnace. But he survives by hiding in a chamber where the smoke gathered. He comes out stronger than before, but has an Achilles heel that he cannot deal with smoke anymore. This comes up some in battles... which we're skipping along with most of this book." I waved the book around for emphasis, "Anyway, eventually he challenges the Buddha because he's narcissistic enough to think he can take over the universe. The Buddha, instead of fighting him outright, tells him that they will give him the universe if he can escape his hand. The Buddha is much larger so he can just cloud somersault out of his hand, but he keeps going until he gets to one end of the universe. There are about four pillars standing up to mark the end of things, so he defaces it to prove where he was, writing his name, and kind of sort of peeing on

it. When he gets back, the Buddha opens his eyes and says, 'See? You never even left my hand!' But Sun Wukong says that he has proof, as he wrote his name at the ends of the universe. But then Buddha lifts his fingers, and some tiny writing can be seen, along with the scent of piss." Tamashii interrupted me, "So basically, this is a religious metaphor for the all-pervasive nature of reality, and how we can't escape the truth in our lives?" I nodded, frustrated at already having to abridge the story, "Right. Now shush, I'm trying to finish the story. So Buddha grabs him and slams his fist toward the ground, like this..." So I repeat the motion, showing her that Sun Wukong is now caught between the Buddha's hand and the ground, "The Buddha's hand becomes a large mountain, and Sun Wukong gets stuck for centuries. The bodhisattva Guanyin tells him that if he behaves, in a few hundred years, a priest will head on a journey to move Buddhist scriptures in India to China. The monk Xuanzang indeed frees him, but finds himself in constant need of saving from shapeshifting creatures, bandits, and other beings. The story tells of three other travelers: a pig demon, a weather dragon, and water lizard, all of whom ran afoul of the heavens and likewise need to be redeemed. There's a lot of fighting though, so I'll just skip all of that. They manage, mainly when Sun Wukong approaches various immortals and informs them that he needs help (despite Sun Wukong's power, most of these creatures turn out to be fallen immortals and thus cannot be killed), and make their way back. In reward, each is rewarded for their struggle. Sun Wukong is completely pardoned, Dragon is pardoned for at least carrying Xuanzang and their gear, Pig is not really redeemed but they offer him a job eating sacrifice offerings, and I forget what happens to Sand the water lizard."

Tamashii asked me, "Just one question. What does this have to do with anything?" I blinked, "As I told you, this story is a story about personal growth and redemption..." I paused, realizing that without the struggles and occasional defeats left in the story, since I edited out all of the battles at her request, the entire point of the story was now gone as most of Sun Wukong's growth was achieved through struggle. I groaned, "Alright kid, time to head home. I think I heard your mother

say she was treating you to dinner at a restaurant tonight." I resolved to tell Zoe what a brat Ambrosia's child is, but then decided it wasn't actually worth the drama. She was a cute kid, even though that was obviously a prank that she pulled on me. I recall watching a film called *Princess Bride* where a romance story omits the kissing scenes, but even that didn't go so far as to demand that thousands of pages of fight scenes were omitted for a child's whim.

GOD

I suppose that I could talk about the Buddha here. Long ago, in Ancient India, there was a war going on. The devices of mankind were waged against each other, and humanity was at the brink of extinction. You heard that there was a famine throughout the Earth for seven years. But it was more serious than that. The world was in very real danger of destruction, as they were developing solaronite particles. Solaronite, as you might have guessed, is a substance that explodes sunlight particles. Ed Wood discussed this in his historical documentary, but everyone just figured that it was a low budget film. I put a stop to that, but in the end, I had to strip humanity of their power to wage war.

Just around this time, a Kshatriya family had a son named Gautama. The Hindu class system known as castes is divided into Brahmin (priests), Kshatriya (warriors), Vaishyas (farmers/merchants), and Shudras (artisans). Outside the caste system were untouchables or Dalits, a social class that came about in response to people living outside the caste system. They worked with unclean things such as leather or excrement so that the rest of the population didn't have to deal with them. In other words, people were treated as servants because they rejected the caste system. This is the truth they don't want you to know about. But I'm getting ahead of myself.

The Kshatriya were also kings, so Gautama was raised in such a way that he would fight to claim land and to rule. This was further complicated by something that happened when Gautama was a mere child. According to prophecy, he would either be a "world renouncer" or a "world ruler." Being a typical member of the ruling class and not very self-aware, Gautama's father and mother thought that it was

obvious that he should rule the world, and never thought that maybe what would become the Buddha would be happier forsaking the world. Ironically, had they embraced his destiny as a world forsaker, he would have also become ruler of the world, a kind and thoughtful king. Instead, they pushed him away from this destiny as they pushed him too hard.

But it wasn't just that. Parents like to shelter their children. They decided that a child like Gautama who was so thoughtful and caring would likely follow such a path if he realized that the world contained suffering. Rather than focus on war or on ruling, he would concern himself with trying to resolve the problems of the world. And so, they sheltered him from *everything*, creating a false world where there was no suffering, old age, or illness, only pleasure. Nonetheless, somehow or other, Gautama discovered a sick man, an old man, and finally witnessed a funeral. He withdrew from society, studied under the Jains until noticing their way of life was too brutal and self-punishing somewhere around the time where he was eating one grain of rice a day. Nevertheless, Jain teachings influenced early Buddhism. The Buddha next meditated under a tree, struggling against several false illusions before seeing the true path. He later acquired several disciples before dying of food poisoning and old age.

As you can see, I omitted all of the fights and struggles that the Buddha had while he was Kshatriya. You, the reader, insisted that it wasn't cool to see Buddha involved in *wuxia* swordfights or defeat armies of trained warriors. I could tell you all about Buddha flying around and fighting in midair, but censors asked I remove it. And so, without all of those epic battles, it just doesn't have the same meaning, does it? I also omitted many of Buddha's teaching, but I am convinced that leaving out the fighting scenes was important.

Oh, all right! Obviously, you viewers don't care what Buddha taught, as vows of poverty and teachings about suffering are boring. So let's talk about that time that Gautama Buddha fought off a fifty ft tall gorilla monster. You see, after the Buddha attained enlightenment, some big gorilla called him some name. Buddha was committed to peace and nonviolence, so he started using oxymoronic attacks like

Ahimsa Slash (a sword strike that injured it repeatedly with swift strikes), Eightfold Path Wheel Attack, and Benevolent Buddha's Hand of Crushing Destruction. The gorilla fought back, but it was pinned to the ground. Buddha continued fighting, subduing pigs, dragons, and water lizards with his amazing fighting ability. And this is how Buddhism spread. Honest.

Chapter 9

In which God creates the first nature meditation music using weather acoustics

LILITH

So ummm, don't confuse me for Adam's wife. I'm a demon, with tail and horns and all of that. Awhile back, I had some fun times with Michael, and then I sorta stole Elias's girlfriend Aqorm from him. But he didn't seem to mind, as the whole time we were having sex, he was reading novels and stuff. So here I am, looking after two children, both of who are mine but who couldn't be more different. Sastraneth has elf ears but claws and teeth like mine, and she's a wild kid. Kinda like Tommy Djilas. Portia doesn't even seem related to me, she has beautiful wings and a powerful aura that makes people wonder whether they should tremble or try to protect her. And you know, usually when we drop the kids off at Tamashii's I have to put up with awkward conversations filled with glares as I have to somehow justify how I slept with both of them. On some level, both of them love me, but the reality of things is that I'm been to Hell, and even that didn't feel like this. Had I known what I would have to deal with, I probably would have just chosen one of these partners. All the same, the children make me happy, so I guess it's worth it?

So anyway, I showed up with Aqorm and Michael to take the kids home. This was a pretty regular routine, as Tamashii regularly hung out with her friends, and even did the occasional sleepover. But it was always awkward for me. Aqorm and Michael would briefly glare at each other, then forgive each other again for a time, and instead both decided to glare at me. Each time they picked the kids up, I had to decide who to go home with. And some nights, neither one welcomed me, and I had to make my own arrangements. I had a place at the Aiken Monastery, working as a mad chef who specialized in demonic

cuisine. The bloodier and more horrific, the more popular it was with clients apparently. Later in life, Satan gave me an honorary noble title, and I spent time reforming Hell. What? No, he wasn't trying to tempt me into evil, Satan is more like a prosecuting attorney. Anyway, I spent much of my life not feeling like I had a place to call home, so it was good change. Especially since I frequently felt homeless when I got together with Aqorm and Michael. But enough about me. Let's talk about poor Tamashii.

The girl had been driven from her home town, and while the new citizens weren't all torches and pitchforks, it was a town where she didn't really know anyone. So she tried to stay in touch with her family and friends, and I could tell that she was lonely whenever they couldn't visit. I could tell this especially because Tamashii was trying to talk to Portia and Sastra just a bit more before they were carried off by separate boats. But then it started raining, mirroring her anguish. The light pitter-patter of gentle drops became a dull roar which in turn became a deafening sound of wind and rain. The rain soaked our clothing through, letting my dress show my full outline, and making my breasts perk up quite a bit. I felt sad for Tamashii, as Ambrosia's house didn't look all that watertight. Ambrosia's and Tamashii's blue and purple hair respectively turned matted and soaked like some drowned rat. Phoenix was often plagued by harsh rains, but this particular rain storm was felt around the New Earth. Even desert areas got decent rain during this storm.

It continued raining solidly for the next six days. If you're curious, I went to join Michael, crossing the Divine Border. This was more pragmatic than anything else, as we climbed this mountain and crossed above the clouds, eventually the rain was below us. So while Aqorm, Sastraneth, and Ambrosia's family were soaked to the bone and didn't go out for the next few days, I was warm and dry. But since my entry into Heaven was conditional to watching after Portia, I had to put with six solid days of sighing as we watched rain pour from the translucent clouds below us. That girl had a rough case of lesbian longing. And Michael wouldn't even let me tease her about it. I might been in Heaven but I wasn't having a great time.

TAMASHII

What? No, our house isn't that bad. Our roof is a patchwork of materials. Straw is on top, and it absorbs a lot of moisture. It's held in place by slats of wood, which in turn are drilled into a mix of tin and aluminum, which in turn is attached to various hard woods that make up our house. Mostly cedar and teak, I think. We updated our foundation to brick, after a bout of termites almost ate our house one time. It's pretty good now, we had it checked. And it's watertight. Mostly. There are about four buckets to catch some steady leaks. For the next few days, we have to swap these buckets and toss them into the drain in our sink. We don't get much sleep between that and the sound of the percussion whenever the rain slips between the straw to hit metal. Each of us get only a few hours each night. Finally, near the end of six days, the rain slows down, I see the bright of a Gate opening up. Unfortunately, while Portia manages to plug the leaks of the house, I don't get to talk to her much, as fatigue overtakes me. She tucks me in, and then it is another few days before she visits again properly.

GOD

I kinda skipped over the story of the Flood, if you were paying attention. But now it's time we talked about it. The Bible talks about this Flood. So does the Epic of Gilgamesh. And many other written and oral traditions. The point is, this happened all throughout Pangaea, and humans decided that it was very important after it happened. Why was it important? Well...

Long ago, there were only the humans, animals, plants, fungi, monera, and protists... okay, maybe "only" isn't the right word. And the Seraphim, but I'll get to that. And yes, I listed humans as a separate thing from animals. Biologists will tell you that humans are animals from their genes, but that isn't quite true. If we see DNA as a visual representation of the soul, one quickly realizes that the DNA of animals is designed for their survival. They are made purely to inhabit the Earth, to thrive and reproduce. A cat can be creative, but they don't write poetry, they don't create philosophy, and any music they play is mainly to get food or please their owner. And more

importantly, they have an Afterlife. Animals simply become disorganized spirits that only really come alive again in the presence of their owner. Basically, the cat or dog just reincarnates immediately, and only a sort of echo is left behind. Higher order souls don't do this.

So what are the Seraphim? Well, after Adam and Eve left Eden, they wandered the land kinda doing whatever they wanted. I hadn't given them any real rules, so some of them tortured animals or even had sex with them. Some enslaved other humans. Some did things that I'd rather not talk about with dead bodies. Other made war. Still others started building things. I had assigned my Seraphim, angels imbued with great intellect and power, to watch after these humans and see that they did not blow themselves up. But as it turns out, humans are violent and horny. Seraphim were terrible and beautiful, some of them looking like humans but with glorious iridescent wings, while others looked like giant lions with too many heads or wings or eyes. It turned out, humans didn't really care about this. They'd human a jellyfish if they thought it would be productive. And that's how the metroids came to be. But in a more relevant note for this topic, this is how Seraphim became modern angels.

Humans were born, with the intelligence of angels but the potential of humans. These giants as they called themselves built high technology equal to the 20th century. This coupled with the angelic ability of faith meant that massive floating buildings with deadly weapons were made, along with factories that spewed horrific smoke into the air. They mined the materials that produced this smoke from what were known as slime pits. The smoke threatened to blot out the sun. As I didn't want the Seraphim to overrun the Earth or to replace humans with giants, I put an end to this. I split most of my Seraphim into an immortal body and an immortal soul. The immortal soul were these human-like giants. The immortal body were my angels. And I made angels sterile. But something had to be done about these giants.

While I was busy thinking, I discovered that humans don't really stick around to wait for my decisions. Not unless I pause time. And so, technology became more and more advanced, until they had massive Godfighter starships probably in preparation of finding out

where I live and hitting me with a DeathCovenantX150 missile. I'd shrug it off, but I didn't want to constantly have to fight humans. So I kinda sorta erased those from existence, and then burned the plans forever (including from their minds). There will never again be any Godfighter starships or such missiles. They did manage to destroy a world between Earth and Mars with one of these missiles, though. This didn't stop them though. Failing to fight or destroy me as God, they wanted instead to become God. They made a foray into genetic manipulation. On some level, I wanted company, as before I started creating, I had been alone. But this was too much!

It started out innocently enough actually. The first experiments were to try to cure Knowledge of Good & Evil (the common cold) using a vaccine, even though this was exactly what made them human. But you couldn't really do that, even among these giants. Exactly like they say, "There is no cure for the common cold," and I should know because I made that expression. The first experiments had the side effect of children who were emotionally empty, and immediately wanted to die. Ruling that a failure, they nonetheless doubled down, and made syringes that would affect the same generation that took it. They experimented with animal DNA, believing that because they saw animals climb faster, jump higher, or scream at things in order to see in the case of bats, that animals must be superior to humans in the scheme of things. Using a marketing campaign that would make 20th century Earth's ad agencies jealous, they quickly convinced much of the world that it would cool to have blue hair or yellow eyes, or a tail. And so, the first hybrids were made. However, genetic sickness is nothing to (pardon the expression) sneeze at, and these hybrids had terrible side-effects such as anaphylaxis, thrombosis with thrombocytopenia syndrome, Guillain-Barré syndrome, myocarditis and pericarditis, and more than occasionally they would simply drop dead. They tried another tactic, this time using altered steam cells from animals. Cancers would grow in their blood stream, and they would die from blood clots. Yes, this is what stem cells are. It's a dangerous technology if you don't understand how to use it.

In any case, I didn't want humans these catgirls, lizard people, elves,

and dwarves to outnumber humans or replace them. So I flushed the system. Literally. I sent a bunch of human families on boats or other crafts, then I rained the Ancient Earth for several days. This had the added side-effect of creating a sort of dead immortal human from what had been giants. I named them "demon" (it was an acronym of **de**ad im**mo**rtal huma**n**), as because they were not alive, they had no living soul, and no living body. I made them weak to divine power, and every angel now had a demon as a counterpart. The two had to learn to live in harmony, so I made them share wounds with each other. And both of them were mostly sterile. They technically could reproduce, but I made the process very difficult. The flood took place on Pangaea, so it was easy to flood the who area. But not all of the land was equally flooded as some areas were on the tops of mountains, so not all cultures told future generations about the Flood story. One of the landmasses (later known as Mu or Atlantis) washed away from main landmass. The people who had been there quickly evolved through the aid of their psionic abilities (that particular island had been known to produce what are now called Soulfires), using up all of their power to become the merfolk.

But there were other side effects too. For example, before the Flood, there was a thick layer of moisture that protected against radiation. This water above the Earth meant that humans could live roughly ten times what they later did, having lifespans up to a thousand years. After this, it was a wonder if they reached age 90 without incident, and they were younger for much longer. Another thing that changed was that in order to deal with the excess moisture, I converted it into ice and clouds. These icecaps created much colder weather when moisture evaporated into the air into the clouds. Where before the world was not as good as Eden but still relatively green, now there were uneven regions of temperature and vegetation. It was not as fun to live on Earth, but I did create more variety.

Chapter 10

In which Tamashii joins Elias in some light reading

TAMASHII

As a child, I used to visit the Great Library often. In fact, even

when I was an adult, whenever I was bored or depressed, it used to cheer me up to go and visit the library. I think Elias must feel the same way, because I always seemed to see him there.

"Hey there," I said. "The style of speech of these younger generations," Elias commented, "Clearly your mother taught you to speak thus. The proper address is, 'Hello again, Elias! How kind of you to let me come.' Or something along those lines." I responded with, "The manners of the older generations. Always correcting based on past grammatical traditions. Wasn't the point of proper speech to make others feel welcome? In way are you doing this if you cling to past traditions instead of accepting that Common gradually evolves, and at least respecting the way people speak it has changed." A long tense awkward moment followed, in which Elias considered that Common no longer uses commas for extended groups of adjectives. Then a snicker followed, followed closely by a chuckle and a guffaw. Elias collected himself, "Yes, I suppose that is true. In any case, I suppose you have a book in mind?"

While many people instead went over to Crystal Mirror rental, I much preferred the library to movies, even though our family did indeed watch a great deal of those as well. When I got older, it got harder to read, but still I liked how books had unique ideas, while many of the movies of the earlier periods had more or less been tapped out because of issues of marketability. They totally missed the point! Here you had a medium perfect for creating dreamlike imagery, and you instead wasted it on stupid boy-meets-girl stories and movies with a lot of explosions. But with books, you could technically write anything you wanted. For example, I could say write now that while I was explaining the merits of books over movies, Elias's hand began to glow with a bright pink flame as he explained that he had discovered a new power. He didn't, but that's beside the point. With a film, they would have to resort to expensive compositing effects. But I only used regular words to do this.

Elias and I had different tastes in books to start with. When I first came to the Great Library, I was reading children's books, and then being a prodigy, I moved up to novels. Lately, I had gotten bored with

novels for much the same reason as many films didn't interest me (seriously, stop repeating the same tropes and create some interesting stories), and had started to read more fantasy and science fiction. But today, I decided it was time to read something else.

The Great Library has books of magic, but as a Soulfire, I couldn't read those without an interesting experience. Psionics and magic are two different things, and even sorcery and alchemy were incompatible with conventional magic. Most books of magic were... let's say, difficult reading. Think queasiness, unconsciousness, or just inability to remember what you just read. Regular people would typically distinguish themselves from talentless hacks by being able to continue after several tries. But people like me with a different affinity of magic simply had a lifelong learning impediment with regards to magic. This ruled out the entire Magic/Sorcery (MAG) section. Now, I could learn psionic magic from the Mysteries (MYS) section, not to be convinced with the mystery novels section, but unfortunately that section was lumped together with writings authored by Cthulhu. I didn't feel like going mad if I picked up the wrong book.

That just left THM, OS, S, and BLU. BLU was blueprints (typically models that a talented engineer or alchemist could use to make something), OS was oversized, S was sometimes abbreviated SCR for (you guessed it) scrolls, and THM was for thaumaturgy (clerical books). Mystery books could make you insane, books of magic were often protected by runes. What about books of thaumaturgy? Well, for actually, anyone could read them, and probably anyone could use thaumaturgy regardless of affinity. This was because thaumaturgy wasn't really magic but more like prayers. Your own affinity shouldn't matter here because you are requesting outside help from a higher power. But, actually real masters of thaumaturgy were incredibly rare. While these books wouldn't hurt me to read (they would hurt Lilith though), most people who weren't prophets or something couldn't actually use these prayers except under miraculous circumstances. Mom couldn't read *any* books of magic, thaumaturgy included. She had what was called a Major Effect, a condition where a curse, blessing, antimagic, or words to a powerful spell prevented retention

of other magic. But having my own Soulfire power be a curse, this led me to wisely instead choose a nonfiction book. "I'll pick..." I paused while deciding, looking through books on that shelf, "this one!" I pulled out a book called *The Shallows: What the Internet Is Doing to Our Brains* because the cover looked interesting. The book talked something I didn't understand at all. It talked about the dumbing down of society as a result of searching on the internet, how social media and memes made people argue about stupid things and post silly cat pictures, about the GIFT theory, and so on. I just had one question, "What is the internet?"

Elias had to reference other books for the answer to that one, because it was ancient history. After an hour of reading, it was time for Elias to leave. He had seen everything. But when he tried to walk off, I kinda grabbed him and forced him to explain everything. "All right, I'll tell you," Elias began massive exposition, "Thousands of years ago, cellphones and computers weren't like what you see today. They weren't run by runes, they didn't directly yield answers based on direct questions. You weren't asking God the question, and having him show the answer as it happened. You instead had a web page run through person-to-person connections with a lot of hacking, extra pages (since they didn't really know what you want), distracted searching and time wasted on videos and images, and a great deal of drama." I still didn't understand, so he demonstrated by grabbing my phone, "Show us what the internet looks like." The phone lit up with runes, and God immediately showed a webpage, and a user vainly trying to search for information only to get a close but not exact search. Elias said, "Words like internet and cellphone is appropriately named. You are inside a space that is connected to many things, but unlike a direct search, more often you wound up wasting massive amounts of time, being caught in the net or a prison cell, so to speak. More direct was Alexa, but..." He asked the phone to show that, and I got to see how Alexa claimed Jesus was only a mythological character and not an actual historical person (Mom had met the guy, and even had him cook her some eggs), and another showed a person asking Alexa if they were spying on them and I got to see from the device

they asked all the to the person listening at the other end.

Elias then followed up with several thousand horror stories, most of which involved Reddit or 4Chan. My eyes went from concerned to horrified to temporarily traumatized. I later wouldn't remember most of his explanation, remembering only the context surrounding it. To this day, I only remember being shocked beyond imagining.

GOD

As Elias explained the horrors of social networking, memories flashed back to the other guy named Elias. You probably know him as Elijah. They couldn't be more different. Not because this Elias is unrighteous, but he's just so calm and bookish. The Elijah I knew was very troubled for most of his life.

Let's go back a bit. The Ancient Earth was a very turbulent place to live. There were all manner of high tech weapons, they were a lot of political protests and angry people largely because very few people knew me. They had devices much like these so-called smartphones, but they were constantly staring into them. They were usually desperate for money, as they were constantly struggling to pay off fees. In this environment, there was also harsh class competition, as some people were living in mud huts while others lived in the closest thing to skyscrapers that existed in this timeline.

Not that the Hebrews were totally the ones living in mud huts. There was just a great deal of technological inequality, because the people who were in charge of science convinced people in lower classes that they could build such things because they had the power of the gods. In actuality, this was somewhat true, only it was because I allowed them to be prosperous for a time that they were able to do this. The Hebrews had devices of their own as a blessing from God, as I assured them of several blessings. They would always have some way, either through miracle or science, to have a fertile land whenever they occupied it while their land would turn into a desert if others tried to rule over it, for weapons of destruction to turn against their enemies (such as a missile system that blew up things like nukes in mid-flight, to name one such effect), and they always had a land filled with good things and clean water to drink from a well. Their enemies drank

from wells that were filled with arsenic, but I gave them living water. The Hebrew people might look uncivilized though, because their works were in balance with nature, while those of their rivals were technology based on power. The Hebrews developed for knowledge and defense, never for power. Like the light side of the Force.

While all of this was going on, Elijah challenged the priests of the day. The story was adapted to fit more ancient mindset, as later, people understood this technology about as well as Tamashii understood the internet. So it was set up as some sort of altar scene. But the actual event played out more as a competition between technology and the power of thaumaturgy. Back then, as now, only prophets had thaumaturgy. This was before Jesus offered the gift to work miracles to virtually anyone who believed.

Elijah put them to the test. "Your technology, your gods, against the God who created all things. I apologize, God, for putting you also to the test." The challenge caught the attention of local social media, and went viral. A group of service technicians responsible for the national satellite coverage responded and word was sent to Elijah arranging a meeting time and place. It was difficult to reach Elijah because he was technologically illiterate, but they managed to send a snail mail letter that reached his address. He showed up and was offered to name the challenge. The service technicians asked him, "Name your challenge! For our technology can do anything!" And seemed true. They had managed to sync the 8@ΔL server (pronounced "Baal", this was the equivalent of Alexa today) to the weather using advanced cloud seeding and other weather technology, to food delivery systems, and even to systems that could modulate the sun and moon. Oh sure, they told the public the Earth was round and that the sun and moon were distant, but they knew as well as the Hebrews that both were within Earth's atmosphere and thus able to be controlled. Neither were their satellites actually in space, they were blimps and weather balloons. It was a smokescreen of lies and half-truths. It was an impressive-looking power that could seemingly do anything in the natural world, but it wasn't unassailable. God however, existed outside the Yggdrasil, the visible "solar system" reality. This weather system

could seemingly maintain perfect weather, so he said, "As the Lord God of Israel lives, before whom I stand, there shall be neither dew nor rain these years, except by my word." Then he walked away for awhile, leaving his challengers dumbfounded. They could not produce any rain due to some sort of interference. Nor could their surveillance devices send any data to locate him, in order to force him to make rain. All this time, Elijah drank water from a brook near a ditch, and received food from ravens. I don't mean he ate ravens. I mean the ravens brought him bread and meat. Yes, really. Eventually though, the river dried up and he had to move to another country because there was no rain within the country for years.

Oh sure, the weather forecasts claimed this day or that day would be days when it would rain. But they would be wrong again and again. Just like snow forecasts for Virginia in 2023. The people began to distill water in order to survive.

Elijah went to an old widow named Zarephath. She gave him water, but when she asked for bread she said, “I don’t have any bread – only a handful of flour in a jar and a little olive oil in a jug. I am gathering a few sticks to take home and make a meal for myself and my son, that we may eat it - and die.” Instead, Elijah told her that as long as the drought lasted, she would have enough bread and enough oil. And she did. Day after day, there was enough for her, Elijah, and her son. But eventually, he became ill and died. She wanted to blame him for killing her son, but Elijah cried out to God, "Lord my God, let this boy's life return to him!" And God performed a miracle. Life was restored.

Elijah returned to the city, after having been gone for three years from the country and an additional six months from when the drought dried up the brook. The technological leaders wanted to kill him, but as far as regular people were concerned, Elijah was trending. He had clout. They called him an influencer. Elijah was unconcerned with such things, but it became increasingly obvious that his rivals were simply posers like people from TikTok that we're supposed to care what latest thing they are up to. They had no real power. These service technicians said, "I think this drought was a fluke. You have

no power any more than us. Give another challenge, and we will prove that your God cannot do it." Elijah shrugged, "Very well, kill two cattle and place them on a platform. With your state-of-the-art devices, you will direct heat to the area and burn your sacrifice, and I will do the same to mine using prayers." A similar story is in *Journey to the West* between Taoism and Buddhism. But I digress. In theory what Elijah asked was possible given their connectivity, they could simply refract the sun's light at a target. But before even the drought began, I had arranged for their satellites to permanently fail due to a DDoS attack. I could have also hit it with an EMP or simply erased it. But I thought hacking was a lot more fun. It hadn't been operational for years, and despite a full team of experts, it never would be again. I got to see them frantically trying to debug bad code and reprogram the satellites to do their whims. As soon as they saved the changes however, the program reverted to previous save. Elijah laughed as we watched them fiddle with no effect on the systems, "Maybe you should try turning it off and turning it on again?" These satellites were up in the atmosphere, it wasn't as simple as pulling a plug out. But they tried to reset their satellites by signal. Instead, the devices shut down completely and fell to the ground as a molten scrap of metal. "Is that your god? A cheap bit of man-made metal? I don't know much about these advanced technologies, as we are simple Hebrews. But, if you'll permit me, I'd like to show you what God can do," Elijah said.

Elijah commanded that the bull be made soaking wet from the water that had been distilled. And he prayed to me, and the energy of thaumaturgy emanated from his prayer. And I decided to answer it. The bull at his platform was burned, and with that sacrifice I brought a torrent of rain, enough to make up for the years of drought. These idiots who trusted the science were now standing soaked while rain continued to fall.

Not that science itself is a bad thing. Now and then I and my followers used technology in order to spread teachings to distant people. Irrigation brings water to areas where one land has more than it wants, and another needs it. Medicine heals people so I don't have

to deal with a nation or cripples or lepers. It's when people make it a god that the problem starts.

In any case, these technological leaders were pissed. They ordered their groupies to chase after Elijah and kill him. It appeared that Elijah had been betrayed. It appeared that everyone had turned away from God. Elijah became depressed, and hiding in the wilderness while they sought his life, he said, "I have had enough, Lord. Take my life, I am no better than my ancestors." He cried himself to sleep.

Elijah was not a powerful man, he was not a confident man, he was just a man who had faith in me. And so I appeared to him in a dream and said, *Arise and eat*. When he woke up, he found a cake baked on hot coals near him. There was a jar of water near him. He drank and ate but the jar slipped out of his hands and broke. And so I appeared to him in a dream and said, *Arise and eat, for the journey is too much for you*. There in the same spot was an identical cake (only this one was decorated with nuts and rose petals) and the water jug was whole and full as if it had never fallen. He traveled forty days to Mount Horeb, a mountain that survived from Ancient Earth to the modern world, despite geographic shifts and ice rims changing all other landmasses. How? Well, you may know this mountain by another name. Kunlun. This is a area of land that immortals who learned my ways came to live, it's an area that I moved at will to serve my purposes. It was in Ancient Earth now, but unlike the Temple Mount where massive amounts of unsightly sacrifices took place, this was a mountain where I found it comfortable to talk to humans. Not that I needed to, but because they needed a place where they could see me in my awesome power, just as Moses had sometime earlier. Most maps fail to pin down where Sinai or Horeb are, precisely because I move it around. When Moses encountered it, it was in the outskirts of Egypt. But when Elijah went to Horeb, it was near Israel. Other times, it was in Ancient China.

In any case, Elijah climbed the mountain and hid in a cave. I asked him, *What are you doing here, Elijah?* Elijah explained, "I have been very zealous for the Lord God Almighty. The Israelites have rejected your covenant, torn down your altars, and put your prophets to death

with the sword. I am the only one left, and now they are trying to kill me too." I told him to go outside so I could hear him better. Outside, a wind powerful enough to tear the mountains apart passed by. But my heart wasn't in it, and Elijah lived. An earthquake powerful enough to shatter the rocks happened. But my heart wasn't in it, and Elijah lived. Flames hot enough to turn the mountain into lava came next. But my heart wasn't in it, and Elijah lived. I asked him, *WHAT ARE YOU DOING HERE, ELIJAH?* Elijah explained, "I have been very zealous for the LORD God Almighty. The Israelites have rejected your covenant, torn down your altars, and put your prophets to death with the sword. I am the only one left, and now they are trying to kill me too." I rolled my eyes, and told him to go back and stand up for Israel. I told have that there were still plenty of people who didn't bow to the influence of those who sought Elijah's life, and that I would appoint people to help get rid of his enemies. And they did. Elisha in particular became his successor after he died, and I appointed many prophets after him, though none had faith as great as him (until Jesus came). But these prophets did foretell the coming of the future Messiah.

Chapter 11

In which high taxes threaten to make everyone bankrupt

AMBROSIA

So for those of you only reading this book here's how things went down in that other story about me. Until about nine or so years ago, I was living on the streets. After delving deep into my past, I had discovered that I was an incarnation of God. Like Jesus, only Jesus was the incarnation of the personal aspect of the Trinity while he lived on Earth, while I was the incarnation of the Father. As such, I effectively sent myself out on a mission to stop Belial and Estheriel. Because my life isn't screwed up enough without me subconsciously sending myself busywork, and being indirectly responsible for the creation and maintenance of the universe.

But for a long while, I didn't know this. I only knew that my birth mother gave me up for adoption because my "Father" (who was for the most part female like me, because she was me), was concerned that I was developing too many powers and would quickly become a

Mary Sue. Nobody wants to be a Mary Sue.

My adopted family loved me, but they were insistent that I should conduct myself with dignity, and not show emotion. And so for quite awhile, the more emotional aspect of myself became forced aside. For the longest time, I thought that this was my evil self. As for me, certain circumstances forced me into poverty, and I wound up a beggar.

Then God called me on a quest to unlock the power of the Tao through a combination of tattoos and dance moves (so to speak, they were actually *tai chi*) in order to fight a demon named Belial, and gradually this "evil self" came out. I had to visit eight Oracles, each of which taught me a valuable lesson.

The first Oracle's lesson was written on a stone tablet, which read «Believe in yourself.» This power was a power over light, effectively making a tornado of radiance. The second Oracle was a live person, and he showed me a mirror to teach me a Taoist lesson about pacifism. This power reflected attacks against her. The third Oracle told me about deja vu and how it might be a sign that I'm not actually real. In retrospect, I think he might have been a huge troll, but I activated his powers when I believed in my own existence. He taught me how to affect time. After that, I went to the Isis Temple, where the Oracle of Death, Thanatos taught me about something called the Chain of Harm. The theory goes that when you hurt others, they tend to take it out on their inferiors and so on, until the overall effect was a lot of anger and hurt. After he made me fight him as well, I thought it was finally over, but then he threw me a curve ball. He showed me my other self, and how much I had let my emotions ruin things around me. Unfortunately for him, this other self of mine was more interested in my love life than typical evil things like violence or murder, so his plan of turning me against myself didn't work. His power was over death, although it also had a second technique which drained energy rather than life. Then I met two Oracles in Hell and Heaven. The first taught me that there is no lesson, because we humans tend to defy rules and lessons, making things like reverse psychology effective. In fact, she could tell me *not* to do something,

and I might learn to do that instead. From the demon Lilith, I learned powers of darkness, not evil but as a complement to light. The archangel Michael actually tried to get me to join his religion, but from him I learned (indirectly) that what one believes must be something that's part of the self. That belief is a subset of one's passion. Or something like that. His power involved a sense of determination, as it absorbed attacks and then transferred damage, as his was the power of Justice. Or Vengeance, I'm not really clear. The final Oracle was a real pain. The first meeting with him, he basically talked me out of my mission before telling me where I could find the first Oracle, after I finally regained a purpose. The second time, I had to explain to him how best to use my power. I eventually told him that if I tried to be healing everyone, I would probably exhaust myself, and if I tried to be a military figure, the potential for corruption was too great. This power was about humility and stuff. The power he showed me was to do with opening or closing my body, the power of boundaries. There was a ranged attack I could do with it too, but basically I was like a ghost or solid as a rock.

After that, I went up to a tall mountain to face myself in order to gain the ultimate power, the power of the Tao, the power of balance between my "good" side and my "evil" side. Actually, the final lesson was that this other side of me wasn't evil. Oh yes, we humans do have sins, and indeed make them worse by denial. But until I was able to love myself, I could not hope to love others.

You see, I met the child of the king of Phoenix, a boy named Nevras. He challenged me when I was being too into my own stuff, and he cheered me up when I got all emo. It was eventually through his help that I defeated Belial, discovered my divine nature, and went on to create a new version of the New Earth. You see, the world we lived in wasn't real, and so I had to fix that part. My first "child" was actually something called the Universe Egg, a cosmic keystone that allowed reality to be real. My second child, and my first as far as everyone else was involved, was a cute like purple-haired girl named Tamashii. Later, God sent me on another quest in order to fight Estheriel, an overzealous angel that thought free will was the mistake

that caused Belial to rise to power. But let's not talk about how that came out. I don't want to think about that event...

But it was not only Nevras who helped me during these quests. In Shoten, I met the half-elf Aqorm (who later became a full-fledged elf through some elves performing a surgery on her) and the scholar Elias. In Aiken Monastery, I met a Druid named Zoe (well, her name was originally Anideshi, but that was a stupid name so I changed it). In all this time, I was also meeting the Oracles and unlocking my powers. There was a lot of hardship along the way, but I think I had some fun with Nevras and the others. I met Lilith the demon and Michael the archangel in Hell and Heaven, respectively. In New Earth, both of these places could be traveled to by boat or airship. It was a bit easier by dragon though, as the Island Closest to Hell was a jagged mass of mountains forming the edges of the island. I had never tried to climb this mountain range, and I probably am glad I didn't. The area surrounding Hell had a hot and miserable climate.

We also found some bonus party members. The evil wizard Yazim Jianne joined our party around the time that Belial betrayed him, and he's been with us every since. But there has always been the awkward feel of having a mad scientist sorcerer guy in our group. Yazim Jianne wasn't always like this, though. He used to have a wife named Sarai, but one of his experiments killed her. He worked for Belial to get her back. Well, sort of. He could have gone to a priest and had her resurrected, but he had some kind of hangup about pulling her soul from the Afterlife, and instead wanted to make a clone of her soul or something. And then there was Selqui, a more than slightly insane merfolk cultist in Atlantis who when we first met her, she was trying to summon an Elder Formless. Nobody can accuse us of having a group that is not multicultural, I suppose.

GOD

Beginning at the time of Noah with the first foray into genetic manipulation, and continuing with every experiment thereafter, whether scientific or magical, there was a growing sentiment among people that hybrids were not "right". Religious teachings, whether written or oral, condemned this nearly universally. They called such

things the Mark of the Beast, never realizing that this was the currency type for Hell until they replaced it with Lucre (they replaced it, because these barcodes had a tendency to create widespread amputations). More often though, these beings were regarded as spirits, or even demons. The Hebrews used the Shema Yisrael in order to do Exorcism. Each religion involved in this had their own sutra of Exorcism. The Hindus had their priestly caste study the Atharva Veda. The Buddhists recited verses from the Pali Canon, as well as the Metta Sutra, Dhajagga Sutra, Ratana Sutra, and especially the Āṭānāṭiya Sutra. There's also the Kuji-In, and we mustn't forget that the Inuit and other small tribes had medicine people and shamans. Catholic priests did a lot of "The power of Christ compels you" stuff. But all of this ignores some simple problems.

First, demons were not what most religions thought, they were indeed a corruption of angels, but if I intended to get rid of them all, I could have just said the word. They were part of an ecosystem, in the same way as predators in a forest hunt deer. What I didn't want was for demons to take over, but the random demon was not an unforgivable thing. The only exorcisms Jesus did were attached to people. He did not go to the Pool of Siloam and perform Exorcism so that it would no longer stir up, nor did he go to pagan shrines that had magic or local spirits and get rid of them.

The second problem with this, was that these hybrids weren't actually demons. Yes, I know that catgirls seem like they will take your soul, but the truth is they are just women with some cat genes. They haven't made a contract with Satan, they haven't pledged an oath. In many cases, they made a choice based on fear, and now have their genetic information changed. Most of these people were dying of the diseases of genetic engineering, and the religious people that were supposed to show them mercy were instead persecuting them. Did all religious people condemn them? I never said that. But we'll get to that later.

Lastly, any contract with a demon or even Satan himself? I had to verify it, in the same way a legal team verified the contracts of their subordinates. These contracts had to be legal, they needed all the

proper escape clauses, and even if someone gave up their soul, there was usually a method that could be used to get it back. This is because all of the demons of Hell, while they were following their own agenda, ultimately served under me. Hell is not divided against itself, neither is my Kingdom divided, rather both served the ultimate good. The demons believed that without suffering there could be no such thing as good. They had a point. How can you know someone is beautiful for instance if everyone looked beautiful? Everyone would be ordinary. You need not only extremes in beauty but also ugliness, or people don't value beauty. And since I created all the universe, I also brought them into being. Most demons worked on one of three projects: doing evil, tempting humans, or accusing humans. Human beings like to accuse demons of the first two, while ignoring the third. Probably because humans don't like to be accused. So you see, this idea this idea that genetically altered beings were somehow agents of evil was totally wrong, because even actual "evil beings" were my creation, and I wanted them to be loved. But the prevailing suspicion was that the reason I brought the flood was that human beings were meant to stay undefiled, and this was a way in which human beings would be permanently separated from me (I brought the flood because such beings had become the majority, not because I hated them inherently). Some of them even wrote fiction about some time when I would punish any people who were genetically different by throwing them into a lake of fire. But as I told Paul when he wrote Romans, "Nothing can separate us from the love of God." Not that you humans haven't tried! But lesser light and darkness was part of the Tao, and because of this, even the most evil being could not disappoint me. Sometimes, like with Belial, I did have to stop them though.

So yes, an awful lot of catgirls got punished or molested because people thought I hated them. As for other species of hybrids, some disguised themselves or learned to hide in forests, mountains, or underwater. Others took power. The lizard people in particular became involved in power over humans, first as leaders in Mayan and Inca sacrificial rites, as well as cults of Molech and Baal. They liked the taste of roast human, and so they were found of heading sacrificial

cults. Later on, having lost control of the religious groups, they tried to take over government and campaign to ban religions while setting up their own religion as though it were science or common sense or something. They also found they liked to rule governments, and set up a number of secret societies to do just that. Whenever you see high taxes, especially income tax or property tax, this is the lizard people is trying to make you homeless, poor, and eventually to get you to either work to death or starve to death, so they can cook you and eat you. This is what really happens during cremation. The lizard people also run cremation centers, and cook bodies to medium rare and eat them. They later give ashes (from wood) in a small urn and expect you to believe it's a body. Anyway, these hybrids weren't inherently evil, though some definitely could be. I wanted to have a plan for these two, but instead this hybrid program was the plan of evil people. Genetic manipulation tended to make people sick.

Chapter 12

In which the plot unfolds. Or unravels?

AMBROSIA

I didn't want to talk about the event where I faced Estheriel. But the question of what happened was nagging at my mind. As I was going over my past in order to explain to the readers, I discovered that there was an actual gap in my memory. Yes, much like the one from long ago. That would be when my memories of age nine and before were forcibly suppressed to keep me from remembering that God was my parent.

When God had come to my mom, God didn't look like me. Not initially, anyway. God's public form was a set of three triangles. Yes, like the Hojo crest. For millions of years of human history, God was referred to as He or Him. Well, this was probably for the best. Baal's wife Ishtar, an opponent of mine (though not remotely a rival, for the only reason I did not do away with Baal and his wife were because they were man-made deities, or figments of the imagination, and I had forbidden myself to strongly interfere with human free will)... I stopped myself. I was going to say that Ishtar referred to herself with divine female pronouns, and called herself the Queen of Heaven. But

I realized even in my parenthetical thoughts, that I had been talking as though I were God. I was mixed up. God was typically separate from Ambrosia, the girl. I was a human, who only used the powers of God indirectly. I didn't refer to memories of God, or know these things directly. Something was wrong...

As I thought through how God met my mom, and started to mix it up with myself meeting my mom, and having myself as a child, my memories began to become twisted up. My last thought was to do with the battle with Estheriel...

The group of us were fighting Estheriel using our best abilities. The fight dragged on for hours, but eventually it seemed like we won. But after a few minutes, Estheriel stood up again, pushing from the ground. “You may have beaten me, but you shall never destroy me!” the archangel declared. I groaned, “ Aww c'mon, already! I've practically killed you.” Estheriel explained, “You should be very glad that you did not, Ambrosia Brahman. I shall use your name, for you have proven yourself worthy of my attention. Look upon my countenance. Unlike Belial, I have not been transformed into a demon.” Estheriel's face was indeed pretty beautiful. But I'm still not sure if that's a guy or a girl. She(?) went on to explain, “This is proof that despite a possible error, I have done no evil in this world. Killing a pure angel would be like murdering a child. The act would taint your soul.”

I didn't knew what to make of this, “I almost did that? Why didn't God tell me...?” Estheriel responded, “There are a great many things God likely has not told you, such as the true nature of the Oracle. In this world, all things fade and die. The worthwhile things are preserved through a cycle of renewal.” She continued this explanation, “Nature, Love, God, certain teachings. All of these pass on from generation, by rebirth or passing on to newer generations. It's not a question of how good or bad someone is, nobody is spared this fate.” I said, “So what?!? It’s not like God can die.” Estheriel laughed, as if to correct us.

Estheriel elaborated, “The reason God is eternal, is because God can choose an heir in order to be reborn. Well God doesn’t really

die, so this isn't accurate. It's a rebirth if you want to call it that. But it's more like a resetting or a memory wipe. The last of the Oracles was an experiment, but God realized that only a true incarnation would work. The Oracle can renew God, or they can become God. The former is done when the Oracle dies, but the latter can only be done by taking the role of God and abandoning one's earthly life." I fidgeted with my Tablet before returning it to her pockets. I knew about using the power of God by typing into this Tablet, but each time, I risked disappearing for good.

I needed more explanation, " I'm still not following. What will you do?" Then I said as Estheriel coughed some blood, "You're about to die, aren't you?" After some strain, Estheriel mentioned, "As an angel, I have certain powers... Such as to possess bodies... I could easily become you and take over all existence, ruling as the new God." Welp, that's it.

"I'm afraid not," a voice to the side spoke. Looking that way, we saw the valkyrie leader, who said her name was something like Brunhilde. Brunhilde raised her spear and then tossed, skewering Estheriel right through the heart. Even for an angel, impaling was a nasty business, although Estheriel was able to talk with such a thing. "But why...?" she asked. Brunhilde sneered, "Why? You should know by now. We valkyries serve only women and the strongest of men. We function as troops to defend love and life. From my battles with Ambrosia, I have found her more deserving of our ranks than you. We valkyries are women of honor, and using gutless tactics like body-swapping to usurp God's throne is inexcusable. God, let me face punishment for betraying my purpose. I apologize, but I cannot abide cowardice." She knelt to the ground and waited for God to make a decision.

God said, *You understand that you will be bound in sleep for the first man to come wake you up, and will be transformed into the weakest woman*? She nodded, and suddenly the valkyrie was wrapped with flames.

The athletic lady sang, then the battle was over. We had all survived, and now we were looking at one girl surrounded by

flames yet not burned. She was a tough lady. Estheriel said to us, “You've got me at your mercy. Now what will you do to me?”

Branch I

NEVRAS

My love (Ambrosia) has a kind heart. I know it doesn't seem that way sometimes. But it's true. When faced between a choice of letting someone go, killing someone, or saving them, she always chooses to save them. After trying all the other options. As Estheriel lay dying, she said, “You've got me at your mercy. Now what will you do to me?” Tamashii said something like, “The likes of you don't deserve mercy.” My dearest with her kind heart said, "Hey, shush!" in the kindest way possible.

Somehow what she did next was obscured from my vision. I saw her holding a clear rectangle, and seemed to be banging down on it with her fingers. I saw a light extended from above, and I saw a burst of prismatic light wash over the body of Estheriel. The angel's eyes opened and they sat up. Estheriel asked, “Why... Why did you save me?”

Ambrosia breathed in like she was gonna give some kinda long and moving speech. She said, “You were right about many things. This world is lonely, terrible, crass, and unjust. People die pointless deaths and it's unlikely to get better. But you were wrong about two things. What the world needs is not God's justice, but God's mercy and love. And, I'm not God's replacement. I'm God.” And with that, she kinda did one of those creepy things where something pops out of your skin. We'd seen this happen with Tiamat, but this one was far less gross. She didn't turn into a three-headed dragon chicken, but instead a big ball of light took shape as a more intensely brilliant Ambrosia walked out of her old physical body. Now Ambrosia was far more like herself. My heart was hurting just from looking at her. The others averted their eyes, but I couldn't help but stare despite reading lore about the dangers of looking at the true form of God.

Before she continued, though, I asked her, “What?!? Really? When did that happen?” She faced me and her kind face was really intense, “Remember when we were fighting Belial and everything sorta

blacked out for a second? Well, there was a lot of stuff I didn't tell you." Tamashii, being the troll that she is, couldn't resist the chance to be snarky, yet she had the sense to speak with her eyes averted. That must be hard, not being able to talk to your mom directly. Tamashii said, "The **nerve**! Keeping stuff from your husband like that!" Ambrosia shrugged, "Ah well, it wasn't something that you'd believe anyway."

Ambrosia with an idle motion shrunk the Universe Egg that we were inside somehow without crushing us, resting it in her hand. However, she was new at this. She realized about that time that we were standing in midair. She quickly manifested a clear white disc below all of us so we wouldn't fall to our doom, blushing as she did so. She explained while touching the Egg, "Nevras and everyone else didn't really exist except as a dream, until I helped create them. That's what this Egg we're in is for." She juggled the Egg briefly, then getting bored, returned it to full size in the space behind her. "So now you know..." she continued, with some feelings of fear of judgement for her secret, "You don't want anything to do with me, do you Nevras? Tamashii? Guys?" There was a long awkward pause. I immediately loved her, but was so dumbfounded I was unable to speak for a second. Tamashii thankfully broke the silence, "Are you kidding?!? That's like the coolest thing my mom can be!" She suddenly found herself in a big group hug with me and Tamashii. Her new form felt at least as soft as her body was, and she was very warm to the touch. "We can join you when you head up to Heaven, right?" I asked. She nodded, "Of course! I'll need some company, and you guys are family!" Tamashii asked, "What will happen to God's angels? And for that matter, God?" Ambrosia explained, "They'll still be part of Heaven. My mom and dad will probably be reborn. Estheriel, I forgive you. You're welcome there too." In the midst of all of this excitement, my heart gave out. I saw the others rush to save me, but it was no good. Everything began to fade away...

BEYOND ALL THINGS

In the history of religion, very few people have seen the true form of God and lived to tell the tale. It takes an exceptional soul. But Nevras

was not an exceptional soul, despite being royalty. He was simply a guy in love with a girl. And so, he died like all mortals, when faced with God. But death is not an end, it is simply a change from living into what comes after. It can be compared to pulling off false garments, to reveal what's underneath. When Ambrosia did so, her soul looked like her body. Ambrosia was always God, God was always Ambrosia. Only the intensity was changed. Seeing God in (His?) true form is nearly always deadly. And Nevras just couldn't resist looking at her.

There have been debates over the years about the transgender population. Some say they are mentally ill for believing that they are a woman trapped inside a man's body. Some say that God made a mistake, and they should have been otherwise. But the material world isn't reality. Once bodies are stripped off, as will happen to all of us after death, what remains is our hearts and feelings. Our souls. I don't think God makes mistakes though, some of us are intended to be tomboys and femboys, so that the soul inside will show the falsehood of physical reality. And so it was that after death, after all things of Nevras's body were stripped away, Nevrasia the woman emerged from the shell. Yes, I know, an earlier ending had Nevras be male in the Afterlife. But this is not the Afterlife, this is the Real World; the world only those able to dismiss all illusion face.

Nevrasia opened her eyes and looked at herself. Souls start as balls of light, which again is why Nevras was either male or female. She didn't have eyes at all until she thought about having a body. Her new hands were long and fine, like a pianist's, her arms were slim, her shoulders narrower, her neck no longer with an Adam's apple, her blond hair longer and wavier than before parting neatly in front and extending down to her hips in back. Moving down her body, her supple breasts, her narrow waist, wide hips, long legs (she was just as tall as before), and cute feet completed the look. She was naked, and yet she was unashamed. She added clothing, but only for style, not for modesty. The air around her shimmered, and suddenly she wore some Mary Jane heels, black stockings, and a gray dress paired with a green mock-turtleneck and denim jacket. Ahead of her in the white empty

space appeared God. Or Ambrosia. This one would never call her God, but rather her Dearest. Like many, Nevrasia could choose to be a ghost, to reincarnate, or to go somewhere like Heaven or Hell for an Afterlife. Nevrasia had not chosen any of these, but rather told the Reapers exactly what she wanted. “To be with Her forever,” she said. And so there she was, the Bride of God, a Saint in Her presence.

Ambrosia shone gloriously. It was not the whole bright light that you see in a lot of those Christian movies. It was a more a vibrance of color and intensity. Every feeling was shared intimately. The slightest touch brought a rush of pleasure far more than any physical intimacy. “Hey,” the girl named Nevrasia said. “Hey there,” responded the blue-haired God known as Ambrosia. Nevrasia yawned. “I'm kinda tired. What will we do tomorrow,” she asked, “how about a date?” Ambrosia nodded, despite knowing that there was no real time in this place. For in this place, one could go anywhere and to any time. Nevrasia could be anywhere as one of God’s Saints: to the mortal world to visit friends, to another person's Afterlife if one of them died, or revisit days or hours in life. Such things were denied to a normal spirit, but if Nevras could do them, Ambrosia could certainly do them as God. They would follow each other anywhere. “I'd love to,” she said, “let's meet near Phoenix. At around nine...”

Branch II

AMBROSIA

Everything happened as before, Estheriel begging for mercy, Tamashii saying that cheesy line, and me shushing her. Ultimately, I had a bunch of choices, but the idea of killing or saving people seemed absurd. I simply walked away, shrugging my shoulders. I told her, “Forget it. I'm not healing you. And I'm not killing you. I don't care about your stupid vengeance against God, I wanna live my life. If you heal up, great for you. Otherwise, that's your problem.” I was leaving this problem what Elias called Schrodinger's cat, although in this case, the “cat” was actually actively being impaled by a giant spear and slowly bleeding to death. I was just gonna walk away. Ah well, I suppose letting fate decide will make everything work just fine.

Anyway, my daughter had gotten her big epic quest. It was time for Tamashii to go. She had seen everything.

I motioned to my husband and child, “Let's go, Nevras. You too, kid.” Nevras said, “Of course,” and held Tamashii's hand as we walked out of this place. We picked up Suzaku in the Aiken monastery, and thanked them for watching our bird. It was looking younger, so I imagine our phoenix had immolated itself in the mean time. After we left, the others went back to their lives, but unlike the last nine years they visit pretty often. While stopping the villain hadn’t been necessary, our journey helped us reconnect. Anyway, I finally realized defeating an angel was never our true quest at all.

Lilith and Aqorm are watching their kid grow up. Lilith eventually made up with Michael too, and Michael is actually enjoying being a mother. And every now and then, Aqorm and Lilith show up in Michael's place. They come by our house too, so I see Sastra fairly often. But I haven't noticed Portia around lately. I guess she's busy helping Michael with important stuff up in Heaven? Or maybe she’s become too cool for us?

Zoe and Azrael quit trying to hide it and confessed their feelings. They're so cute together! Wait, I have a picture! See? There they are, sitting under that tree. Zoe is now eternal, having overcome all 108 of her reincarnations. Azrael doesn't seem to age either, thanks to the sword bonded to her, she's looking as young as when we met her! But she does kinda fade out during nights where the moon is new. But I suppose that's the price she paid for stabbing herself with that sword, after all. Anyway, after years of being together, God granted them a miracle. They had a child together.

Sera visits us some too. She's retired from bounty hunting and focusing on raising her child. The good news is she's got money enough to do this without even having any problems. But from the looks of it, she prefers not to bail out her child. Something about building character. Last I heard, she was training her child to deliver milk, do construction work, and plowing fields by hand. Her kid’s kinda young for that...

Yazim Jianne and Selqui are two of a kind. Apparently, Selqui agreed to donate most of her eggs to science experiments with him. I assume they still have a relationship of sorts, but from what I hear, the two of them used their genetic tissue in some unholy gene-splicing process to make some giant squid-like creature, and are feeding it clones of her. They drop by now and then to show off their "baby," something which looks like Lovecraft critters more than a natural child. Its name is ᒪᑎᒋᐧᔾᔨᓂᓐᓯᒋᔨᓂᓐ. They do have one (mostly) natural child at Yazim's request though. She's a blue-haired selkie named Sarai.

That's not the only visitor we get around here, though... Awhile back, this red-haired kid named Bakamaru d'Angeli dropped by. " Can I play with Tamashii, Miss Brahman?" he asked. I let him, so long as he didn't like try to molest her or anything. "Sure," I said, "Tamashii, play nice with him. Be gentle." Tamashii on the other hand, was a punk. "Awwwww," she say, "but he's weak." Well, she's not wrong. When she's got psychic powers that can kill a yak from hundreds of yards away with mind bullets, I saw her point. "Hey," my voice was stern now, "trust me on this. You drive him away, you'll end up a lonely woman." I should be suspicious of some boy showing up, but Tamashii talked to him like she'd known him her whole life. Sastra seemed to like him too.

Years passed. We all got older. Tamashii became a fine woman. She married Bakamaru when she was about 18, and seemed to be pretty happy. "Thank you, darling, for being there all these years," said the boy. That boy was cute, I'm glad she met him.

Getting older gave me time to think. All this journey, I was looking for some purpose, some reason for our wandering and struggles against creatures, but maybe Lao Tzu was right and maybe I didn't need to stop Estheriel or Belial. Well, maybe Belial. After all, it should be well within the power of God to take away the challenges of this quest, but that never happened. But why? Then I thought of my companions again, and it hit me. All of us needed this quest. I was a wreck of a person, even if I was secretly God, a homeless mess who could not even get hot food. I was without anyone in my life. Nevras

was running away from his parents' expectations and the possibility of arranged marriage. Lilith was a shut-in and Michael was too wrapped up in duty. Zoe was haunted by past lives, while Azrael was trapped by being a celebrity in her tiny town. Aqorm was bored and Elias had effectively created a life where he isolated himself in study. Selqui had made herself crazy somehow, and was sacrificing to Monsters. And Yazim Jianne had lost his dearest one to a terrible tragedy. It had brought Tamashii to her purpose and to the love of her life. In our worst moments, that was when we were helped the most. More than any great purpose, this quest had been to bring us all together.

Then it happened... “Okay, honey, push!” said Bakamaru to a very pregnant Tamashii. My daughter had gotten more beautiful, but as she got older, she had become more hard-edged, and I'm not entirely sure I approved. “What do you think I'm trying to do, you jerk!” she snarled at him. For the next several minutes, she made groaning sounds, breathing out, until at last I saw head, then shoulders, then the rest of the child. It was a girl. They called her Rakuen, the name for Heaven, for she was their greatest treasure.

More years passed, and another change was going to happen.... For you see, while powerful thaumaturgy can allow many people to live long after the normal lifespan, Nevras and I don't have any special powers. When Tamashii got to be middle-aged, we got old. “***cough* *cough* *wheeze* *cough* *wheeze***” I said. Tamashii could tell I wasn't doing well. Nevras and I were sleeping all the time. I was forgetting things. And I limped quite a bit. When I looked in the mirror, it was strange. I remembered an old woman at a graveyard giving me Jar of Human Tears, to protect me from evil spirits in the town of Opening. Why did I look so much like her? But before I could think too deeply, that thought was gone in the mists of old age. “Mother, you mustn't die! I still have many things I wanna do with you,” my daughter said. What was her name...? I responded, “You can do them with your husband now. I'm sure he won't mind.” I explained that we couldn’t all be eternal like those two, that death was a part of life, and that life wasn’t about being safe. I explained that I had met all the friends I wanted, and now it was time for my next

great adventure in the Afterlife. I was only human after all... I also quoted Azrael's explanation that there are four pains: Birth, Aging, Illness, and Death. Letting going of this pain was essential, and not dying is an exception, a rarity, and we shouldn't seek to avoid death. At least, I think that's what I said. I was pretty senile, so maybe that profound speech remained trapped in my head. Nevras told her, "Listen to her. ***cough*** ***cough*** I'm afraid I'm not that long for this world either..." My heart beat slower. I felt each beat. I felt a chill. I grabbed Nevras, hoping not to fall. It was time to go, so we left this world. We died in each others arms.

BEYOND THE WORLD

Ambrosia and Nevras wandered through bleak darkness. **This was the end**. They had done everything, and couldn't imagine any more. Neither one of them had any notion of Afterlife, so they began to fall asleep. "My life... It's fading away. Is this how it ends?" Ambrosia said. Nevras nudged her awake and said, "I think there's more for us. As we built a life together, let's have an Afterlife." And so, they continued walking.

Ahead was a cute black cat with one yellow eye and the other removed, a cat that Ambrosia immediately recognized as her Miss Kitty. The cat wandered forward as if to beckon her onward, mewling sweetly as she led her through the dark murk to two other figures. Near her cat was Nevras's own pet Captain Falcon and a giant wasp to the right. The wasp and the bird had grown in size, now large enough to ride. This was the same wasp she had once led outside, and it appeared to now be intending to return the favor.

The dark world gradually transitioned into one that was a chiaroscuro world. There were dark shadows deep enough to hide one's hand. Yet clouds nearby were bright enough to illuminate the area. Ahead of them stood people dressed like priests from the Joseon period, with translucent black hats. It was basically a fluffy cloud land, besides of course the stark black/white dichotomy. The only thing in fact not using these tones were people. "Really? How cliche,"remarked Ambrosia. It was possible that she was using the word cliche incorrectly. The priests shook their heads, and spoke as

one, “What we call Afterlife is a construct of imagination and feelings. The only thing cliche is your imagination. You must build your Afterlife with your heart. You must shape your eternity.” Ambrosia said, “You mean... this is wrong? That Afterlife looks like...?” The priests nodded, and again spoke as one, “Whatever you feel. Now build your house. And remember... if you ever get tired of your Afterlife, you are free to return to Earth, reborn.”

And so the cloudy world faded away, and was replaced with a world of color. It was Ambrosia's farmhouse with its stone chimney and a woodpile, vegetable field, and a scarecrow known as Mister Zuran nearby. But most of Ambrosia’s friends were not there to visit her, so it wasn’t as nice an Afterlife as it could have been. The living could only visit the dead twice each year, during the Ghost Festival and on Halloween. During this time, the veil separating the dead broke down for a night or so, and Ambrosia could see her friends now and then, though not as often as while they lived.

AMBROSIA

And so we lived our days for an eternity in each other's company. Sadly, Tamashii doesn't see us much. Time is weird here, so it's been generations since we died. By now, she's probably in her own personal Afterlife. But would it kill her to visit?

NEVRAS

It was like Heaven, but it wasn't always happy. We fought over stuff.

AMBROSIA

But the times we had, these were real. Each day I look forward to seeing Nevras again. Whether we fight, kiss, or just hang out together...

NEVRAS

I know that she'll be with me...

AMBROSIA

I know that he'll be with me...

That was what I really fought for as Oracle of Tao. Not some high-minded “saving the world” nonsense. I fought... to spend my days with a person I love.

Branch III

TAMASHII

My mother was stuck in a room, as I said before, with three choices. She could kill an angel before he did horrible things, knowing that it could taint her soul in horrible ways. She could walk away, allowing the aforementioned angel to possibly recover and wreak further havoc later on. Or she could heal the angel using her Console that she got from God. But I'd seen her use that before. Most of the others hadn't noticed, but I, with my psychic abilities, am tuned to the frequencies of existence and reality. Ambrosia had almost left this reality for whatever is Beyond The World, when she last used the powers of God, to help others. Oh yes, I imagine I'm not supposed to know. But I'm a sharp kid, I noticed things over the last few years growing up. Should she heal Estheriel this way, there would be no coming back from it. I'd probably never see her again, until the day I died.

But she didn't make the choice to save the angel. She did what she felt she had to do. In other words, she fucked up (sorry, language) and killed Estheriel, knowing fully that it might make her evil. And that's basically what happened with her.

Let's tell the story starting from the actual events though. As Estheriel lay dying, she said, "You've got me at your mercy. Now what will you do to me?" I told her something that I'd heard from some bad movie, "The likes of you don't deserve mercy." My mom basically told me to shush then, while she thought. After a minute or a few, she made up her mind. She said, "I'm sorry, but I'm tired of mercy. Mercy was what allowed Belial to be sealed so long. And God's mercy turned you into such a nuisance." She pulled out her knife, misusing her memento that she got so long ago from Nevras.

Estheriel was already bleeding, having a spear run through her. She was on the ground and wouldn't have been able to move without worsening her condition. But I feel like if she had been able to move, she would be on her knees begging for forgiveness. Based on what she said next, anyway. She told Ambrosia, "I was only trying to make an ideal world... I'm innocent." I didn't like Mom acting like this...

As much as she tried to hide it, I had seen that Ambrosia had an "evil" side. Once, this other her came out while she was sleeping, and I was running around the house. She turned out to actually be very sweet, warm and kind-hearted. In fact, while Ambrosia saw her as evil, she was actually more like Ambrosia's fun side. While Ambrosia believed in discipline like any sensible mother, but this other Ambrosia was content to spoil me rotten. I didn't just get stuff either, but a good amount of affection. While Ambrosia slept, she took me on trips with Nevras. While she slept, she hugged me and kissed me and petted my hair and told me that I was special. She wasn't evil at all, actually. She was just unrestrained, and Ambrosia was afraid of this side of herself. But I loved her, just as I loved Ambrosia. But I'll admit, her voice always seemed unsettling.

"Wait... I don't think you should do this," my other mother said. Ambrosia snarled at her, her distrust of her other self clear, "That's all the more reason to do it, isn't it? You're my evil self!" Both I and this other Ambrosia had the same sad look on our faces, but Ambrosia was so consumed with stuff that she didn't notice. Nevras spoke next, "I'm a bit worried too, Ambrosia. You've become obsessed with hatred."

For a moment, I saw the mother I remembered. The mother I loved. And then that woman appeared, the one who was bitter from having life happen to her. The old beggar was back, not the woman who became beautiful from being loved by my father. A stern woman who was no mother of mine. This woman said, "No. She deserves to die." My father also noticed, as he was already in tears. "Please," he said, "I'm losing you." The evil Ambrosia told her, "If you do this, I won't exist. You'll have become me..." I can tell her personally that this is not the case, that the main Ambrosia now was acting way worse than this evil Ambrosia supposedly was. But people in sadness don't always see the best of themselves. In the Bible, they had a term for this. "Someone **hardened his/her heart**," they said. This is exactly how it felt, my mom's heart which once beat with such love was instead committed to a path that sucked. I don't believe my mom is evil. But I think, just like those self-fulfilling prophecies where everyone's trying to fight the future, and then do what they hate, she

didn't see any other way besides declaring war on what had troubled her. Ambrosia decided that Estheriel was always going to try to threaten her and our family. She shook her head against her other self, ignoring her words.

I watched some old videos when I was young... well, younger than now. There was an anime show where some androgynous guy possessed by this black blood stuff is being questioned by his shadow, and instead of answering, this kid just says “Pass” over and over again until the shadow starts crying. I was watching the same thing unfold here. Ambrosia stubbornly refused her other self, and her other self was getting more and more sad and frustrated. “No,” Mom said, “his death will end millions.” Evil Ambrosia was on the verge of tears, “Why? Why won't you listen to me? Do you hate me this much?”

I knew my mom. She acted tough, but under normal circumstances, she was a huge sap. She cried on all those old movies during the sad parts, and even cried during really happy moments. Watching her evil self cry like this would usually move her to tears as well. This was more evidence that Ambrosia was not her regular self. Estheriel sobbed, “When I die, you'll become a murderer.” Well, technically Mom had already killed Belial.

It was worse than that. If Estheriel's earlier explanation of just what angels were held true, it was much like eating ortolan, it was a disgusting act that one must even hide their eyes from God about. Ortolan was kinda yummy, though. If she went ahead with this, it would likely change her. Mom's face was twisted in a mix of sadness and rage. She said, “It's better this way. **Now die**!” She slit his throat with her First Material knife, and I saw her eyes change. You know, how people have sort of bright sparkle or intensity to their eyes? Well, I saw hers dim and turn a duller tone of blue. After that, she started stabbing the angel until it looked more like Swiss cheese than a living thing. We had to pull her away, but she went back and continued until she was covered in blood. At one point, she even opened up the body with her bare hands and started playing with internal organs, until Nevras finally grabbed her and shook her. “What has happened to

you, Ambrosia?" Nevras asked, "Have you gone completely mad?!?" She looked like a wild animal!

Her eyes shifted again, as though she had one last trace of remorse, then it was gone. "Heh. Heh. Ahahahaha!!!" Ambrosia laughed. "You still don't understand, do you? The significance of this place. It's not just a lair." Nevras looked confused, "What are you talking about? What is this place?" She explained, "I'll tell you. Sue me if you think I'm crazy. For awhile now the world you knew was just a dream. God was the only one... Oh and here's the kicker. As Oracle, I was born as an avatar of God." I shivered, "I'm scared of Mom, Dad. And... what's an aviator?" She corrected me, "That would be 'avatar', dear. A person like me as representative of God showed the traits most prominent of God, so I too existed and could be used as a replacement for God, if God wanted to retire or something. I took over for God, and gave birth to everyone in this area."

I remembered what Grandpa (Grandma? Mom?) had said earlier, all about us all being characters in a story. I suddenly thought about it again. If God was actually Mom and she was the main character in this story... then that made me a carbon copy of her. Or rather, it made me a carbon copy of Evil Ambrosia. I even had the same general hair color! This was my story, the story of my coming of age. This was the story of Mom's friends, each of them fragments of a single personality. All were God trying to have an adventure, not because there was a real crisis but because the alternative was isolation and boredom. This was the story of the Phantom Virus and the Plague, the former which represented fear and isolation, and the latter which represented pain. This was the story of the State and the Council. The Council was Mom's desire to be strong and independent, while the State was based on that part of her past where she was a beggar who depended on others. Like Evil Ambrosia, she hated that part of herself. It was only when I was born that she began to forgive some of these aspects. All of these things rushed through my brain like an intense vision. In any case, my mind was basically blown. I sat there unable to speak for a moment, completely shocked by this news.

Nevras asked, “So we're not real? You think a love like ours was fake all along?” While sweet, I think he missed the point. She blushed, “Nevras...” Shutting her eyes and acting all disinterested, she said, “Very well. I will spare your lives for now. But soon, I will make them all pay. After all, I created them, so now I must destroy. Balance dictates it, as the Oracle of Tao.” She tried to make it look like sparing us was an afterthought but it was so obvious. Awwww, she does love us! Even while she's crazy and scary.

Not long after when we left this place, we received word that the towns all around the land were being destroyed by some weird magic. Even soldiers and wonder-workers sent to stop this failed. We followed the trail, and it became clear that Mother had been busy. Elias managed to extrapolate that her main target was going to be Opening, before she headed south to other towns. Mom hated Opening, not just for herself, but for what that town put me through. We met her in the forest. Yup, like a wild animal after all.

AMBROSIA

I started killing monsters. I needed the experience, after all. It used to be that people could only find these things within dungeons, after about nine years ago. But suddenly, everything kinda crawled out of the woodwork to attack me. And it was weird, the more I fought after a certain point, the weaker the monsters got. I had been fighting demons and angels, then things like hydras, followed by goblins and orcs, and eventually I got to the point where I was fighting low-level squirrels and sparrows. But I didn’t stop. I was filled with determination. My stats were almost maxed out, and the monsters I fought didn't even present a challenge anymore. It was time to hunt the most dangerous game.

I don't miss those two. After all, they would only mess up my plans. It's better this way, don't you see? It's better knowing nobody ever really existed. For long. Gradually those I knew and loved faded into a distant memory, as I continued to destroy everything. I heard the satisfying crunch of a building I had toppled, and the crackle of sparks as I set it to blaze. The more I destroyed, the ***cleaner*** I felt inside. Those nagging voices quieted down. I heard myself say, “Yes, that's

good. Heeheehohohahaha! But it's not enough. In order to be safe from Them, I mustn't stop here. All the people living in small villages, or the forests, I must hunt down." I continued to rant, "Yes, I must kill them all... Or They will come to get me too. I'll not exist. I must kill to stay alive. It has to be done. Otherwise, my quest was useless. Yes... It was useless! Hahahahaha...."

I used the boat left to me from the old king of Kushiyama to make my way to the next town, stopping in a forest to eat beavers. I had only skinned one when a group of people who I didn't remember shouted after me, "Stop right there, Ambrosia!" A little girl said, "Mom, we're here to stop you!" Hmmm, was I a mother? Something stirred in my belly, but my mind didn't remember this. The demon said, "I'm not." And indeed, she took no aggressive action towards me in the coming battle. "Well, ummm. Most of us are here to stop you, Mommy!" the girl amended. The demon walked off, so she was no threat.

I asked, "Who are you? Have we met?" The girl sobbed, "She doesn't remember us..." The blond guy said, "I hate to do this, but we need to. *Attack her*!" And just like that, these people attacked me. The blond used something called a Speed Slash, while the angel tried to attack me with his sword. But I sidestepped out of the way, and they wound up attacking each other. The Druid and the exorcist attacked me with spells, but I awakened my Apollo Crest and knocked everything back at them. The others tried different things, but I shrugged them all off. "Is that really your best? What's wrong?" I asked. The little girl gasped, "Guys, be careful! Her power is fueled by her emotions, and right now... She's totally over the edge. I think we might die here!" I activated my Tao ability, drawing up as Resonance, as I noted, "Something about them is annoying. I must make these voices stop." The Yin and Yang flowed through my body, then echoed against these targets and back. I remembered who it was that I was using my powers against, for a brief moment, before I lost my mind again. Their bodies were badly torn, and they kinda died there. The recoil of the Resonance hurt quite a bit, but while I was bleeding all over the place, I shrugged this off. Zoe and Azrael lived

since they were eternal now, but the Tao ability put them in enough pain that Zoe wouldn't be coming after me any time soon. And Azrael would not recover until the next full moon.

I sat there cackling and murdering for what seemed an eternity. Using my powers, I wiped out most or all of the world's human population, along with most of the trees and land animals. Most birds and fish were above and below my powers, so there was still that. I did manage to upset the marine ecosystem however, by catching fish with my pole, then stabbing them and throwing them back, killing progressively bigger fish until I had dead sharks scumming up the water. I sound calm now, but this is much later. I came to myself and realized what I was doing. I could no longer excuse myself with insane reasons. The "scarecrows" of my friends and family now acts as a grim reminder of the time that I went down the wrong path. This will not be the only possible reality.

All of us are God, Monsters, and regular people. When we hate ourselves we become Monsters. When we simply live our lives, we are regular people. And when we love ourselves unconditionally and love others, we become part of the whole that is God. I am not proud now, not after looking back on what I did. I accept that I actually did wrong, and don't try to rationalize it anymore. But I believe there is hope. And so, using my power, I split reality into three branches, as I had done before with the whole Universe Egg rewrite. All of these branches are part of me, so if you see me in another story as a crazy person, don't tell people, "she's never done that before." I most certainly have.

I looked down at my body. My Tao ability uses my mood. When I am stable, it works fine. When I'm depressed, it hurts me. When I'm insane... I had destroyed my friends, and so, I had also destroyed myself. My sense of self had become distorted. I looked like something from *Akira*, I had several tendril-like cancers throughout my body. I couldn't breathe, I could barely see, and my organs were wrecked. I deserved it, for I had pushed away all of my friends. I was alone now. I would join you soon, my love, and I would apologize. I

held your mangled body that I had turned into a scarecrow. I would die soon. I was coming to you. And we would be together. ***Forever***.

Synthesis

TAMASHII

My mother was standing in from of Estheriel as she said, “You've got me at your mercy. Now what will you do to me?” I told Estheriel something that I'd heard from some bad movie, “The likes of you don't deserve mercy.” My mom basically told me to shush then, while she thought. She must have been thinking too hard though, as suddenly a sort of psychic storm came up. I don't actually know most of what happened next.

While reading with Elias, one time I came across an experiment by a guy named Erwin Schrödinger. He apparently put his cat in this tube where it was equally possible that the cat was alive or dead. Of course, this experiment could not last forever. Eventually, if he did not feed his cat, it would die anyway, so he would have to check on it at some point. The same was true of Estheriel, as she had sorta kinda maybe been impaled. All the same, somehow I saw all three branches of reality, and didn't know which had actually happened. I suspect we all saw the same, and we didn't get a resolution to the philosophical problem. The Universe Egg cracked open dripping us out of it in a massive stream of yolk and albumen. It resealed itself not long after, but I am perfectly certain that one day, there will be a giant Universe Chicken when it hatches. Assuming it's a fertilized egg, of course.

In any case, all of us looked at Ambrosia, as she lay prone on the ground of an island with her hair touching thick yellowish liquid. She stood up but something about her seemed weird. "Mom?" I asked. Mom struggled to speak, "I'm not sure if I'm your mother anymore, Tamashii." Oh crap. The merged-up Ambrosia/God/psychopath had a body that randomly crackled with light or darkness, as the three realities within her trying in vain to resolve themselves. She had no idea what happened when she was in the room at the center of the Universe Egg, and neither could any of us tell her. Nevras grabbed into her dress, rubbing her breasts for a second, before she grabbed his arm and insisted he touch her more. At length, Nevras pulled out a

necklace on a silver chain that had a whistle attached to the end. The Dragon Whistle. Ambrosia quoted a line from a film, "You know how to whistle, right? You just just put your lips together and blow." I guess I'm not the only one who has lines they always wanted to say. In any case, that's more or less what he did, and Bahamut came to take all of us to Kushiyama. We needed to take her to Jesus, for surely Jesus would heal her.

JESUS

I was in Kushiyama, doing some healing and preaching. I was technically part of the Council now, but they were in recess. The mayor of Zuran had some muscle pain lately as a result of his large size and stature. I offered to help, but the Council felt like dependence in me might create some kind of conflict of interest so instead we were waiting until he recovered.

In the sky, I saw a large dragon flying towards us, so I decided to give a parable, "A man had a dragon, and kept it quite lovingly. There was a farmer who saw it, wanting it in order to make omelets for his entire extended family. But the man wouldn't sell the dragon's egg, not for any price. Another man was a religious leader. Once he saw the dragon hatch from the egg, he declared that its red color meant the times were ending, and demanded he get rid of it. But the man didn't believe in end times, and was not afraid. A king named Galbatorix had originally sought to possess it, but now that it was grown, he wanted to destroy it. The man gave everything he had to defend it from harm. The kingdom of Heaven is like this man, loving even though others covet, fear, or condemn. He who has ears, let him hear." At about the time that I finished the lesson, Bahamut landed right in front of me, "Having you been telling stories about me?" I grinned sheepishly, "Perhaps I have." The group dismounted Bahamut, but Ambrosia continued to sit on her, with a severely catatonic look on her face. As the Son of God, I immediately knew what was wrong with her. "You can help, right?" Azrael asked. I nodded, "Some. How did you get her on? That aura she has is dangerous." Nevras fished into his backpack, "I have these tongs for flipping large fish. She got a little ticklish when I grabbed her by the waist with this, but enough

of her was with things that she cooperated." I grinned, "It's never a dull moment with you guys. Alright, let's take a look..." People knew about me walking on water, but the truth of matter was, I could walk on anything. Walls, lava, on air, and even the Void were perfect surfaces for my sandaled feet. I stepped in midair until my body was level with Bahamut's back, and I grabbed Ambrosia by the hand. She flinched, expecting her power to hurt me, but she calmed down when she saw that I did not fear.

I sighed, "This brings me back. I haven't done this since Adam." I transformed into a woman with deep red hair, because it wasn't appropriate for a male to touch a woman as I would soon. I reached one hand near her shoulder and the other near her midsection, and pulled, almost like breaking pieces out of a clay sculpture of a woman to make two of them. She screamed, and out of Ambrosia came another Ambrosia. Ambrosia had hair like a blue fern, an almost dyed looking intensity. This new Ambrosia had hair that shined almost like polished aquamarine, and radiant skin; she looked like Ambrosia, if Ambrosia had been a movie star. "Oh right," I said, "Last time, I put Adam to sleep. Oh well..." I yanked the second body out of her while she screamed and passed out. This version was what Ambrosia had called "Evil Ambrosia," she had deep purple tone to her hair like Tamashii. But it was time to give her a name, "Lucy, go and wake Ambrosia. You and ummm Sapphire will need to help her manage things from now on." Lucy answered, "Thank you for giving me a body and a name of my own. Now I can live my own life. I will do as you say, Jesus." She shook Ambrosia until she was jostled awake, "Okay, Mom, I'll get up... You! How do you have a body?"

Unlike Ambrosia's split when using the Tao, this actually pulled from the physical dimensions of her own body in order to make a new one. While Ambrosia had weighed 5'8" and weighed 139 lb with a cup size of D, this separation had altered her physical dimensions. Now she was 5'4" and weighed 108 lb with a cup size of B, having lost two inches and a cup size every time she was split. And so were the others. While their dress hung loosely, it still technically fit. It wasn't so kind on her stockings, but I touched them and healed them.

Now they worked with that outfit.

I had the task of explaining to them what was going on. "You see, Ambrosia, Sapphire, and Lucy, all this time that you've been having those flashbacks, it was a side effect of something called time compression..." Lucy interrupted, "You mean like in *Final Fantasy*?" I shook my head, "More like the time compression in *Final Fantasy VIII*, where Rinoa and Squall get a vision of memories. The original *Final Fantasy* didn't really portray this effect well. In any case, yes your past and even your future are all messed up, but you had been stuck unable to really grasp the present for awhile. You should be able to manage now, though." The one that Jesus had called Sapphire raised her hand, "UMMM, SO WHAT DID HAPPEN IN THE UNIVERSE EGG TO ESTHERIEL?" I tried my best to explain, "Well... It's like this. In one version, one of you killed Estheriel. But being unable to deal with that, two other realities were created. This isn't like a delusion, where you're kidding yourself, Estheriel was in fact saved in one reality. To make reality consistent, I saved Estheriel in the other two. But in one of these, the damage had already been done, and one of you wound up emotionally disturbed." At this point Lucy pressed me, "Quit beating around the bush. Which of us did what?" I confessed, "Well, it's like this..." Ambrosia cut me off, "It's me, right? I killed Estheriel." I tried to soften the blow, "Well, you didn't really kill him... But yes. Lucy walked away, and Sapphire healed him and became God." Ambrosia slumped over in a sitting fetal position, arms around knees. I didn't expect things to be easy, but dealing with these three was looking to be difficult. I remembered how easy things seemed in the past...

Back then, I was a mere child among many in Pangaea. The religions of the time were past idolatry and child sacrifice, and many of the religions we know of today existed. There were the Hindus, the Buddhists, the Shintos, the Hebrews, and the pagans. Most of the pagans were aligned with Babylon, but a few were based more on simple nature worship like the Druids. The world of Pangaea was united, and so I had the opportunity to talk to everyone. They thought I was a ninja because I could walk on water, but others thought I was a magician because I could do party tricks like turn water into wine. But

gradually the things I could do grew less and less in line with simple tricks, and even thaumaturgy was unsuitable as an explanation, as I could work miracles freely. Thaumaturgy had a few set prayers that always seemed to work, and miracles had to be requested from God. Yet I seemed to be able to do miracles without asking anyone for help.

I was born of a virgin but it's not like Mary was anything more than human. I rejected notions of worship of Mary, and for that matter so did the real Mary. She knew she was a sinner, and there was nothing "immaculate" about her. Once she had me, she had about ten or twelve other children. I had come to this world, not to be worshiped or teach some sort of altruism, but for a specific mission. Two things, really. First, there was a great need to reform the religions of the world. Nearly all of them had become stuck in the trap of dividing people into moral categories of worthy/unworthy, clean/unclean, and good/evil. But I came to teach that such distinctions didn't exist that all were unclean, all were unworthy, and all had fallen short of goodness. Because of this, all had need for forgiveness. Second, I came to die for sins. Now many though that this required death on a cross. No. Simply by being alive and dying, I was God experiencing sin as a human. I had become part of humanity by living and dying. Death on a cross, or by hanging from a tree, as it actually had been back then meant that I became a curse for their sake, yes. But more importantly, I was like the serpent Moses lifted up, an example for them to understand that their sins were forgiven. Had I simply died normally, they would never have understood this.

Of course, not all religions accepted me evenly. Buddhism discovered about me (you can prove this by a story in *Journey to the West* that is very similar to Elijah's test against Baal, and by a Prodigal Son story in Buddhist literature), but they mostly rejected me. The Hindus hated me because I challenged their caste system. And the Jews didn't like my rejection of the notion that some people were inherently unclean. The Taoists did like me (mostly), which is why their teachings, like mine became known as the Way. Most of the time though, I argued with everyone.

Chapter 13

In which Judgement Day comes upon us all

AMBROSIA

I heard Jesus explain, "It's gonna be okay. It's just a matter of helping you recover. Because you and Lucy both had to deal with the trauma of Estheriel's death, I'm going to do what I can to make sure you recover. But first..." Jesus did some sort of weird pulling thing where she pulled the aura of darkness out of me, compressed it into a ball, and then shoved up in Lucy's womb. Noting my blank stare, he explained to, "I'm putting this darkness in a place where it can't hurt anyone. It's not like Lucy will ever have a boyfriend, since she only has eyes for Nevras. So her firstborn child will have all your darkness. But this won't happen, because Nevras is yours." Lucy didn't seem to hear this explanation, as she was so thrilled to have her own body, that nothing else mattered. Even though Jesus had just put her hand on her nether regions, they were both women, and Lucy was far less embarrassed about such things than I. She didn't notice any of that, except to give a brief moan of pleasure as the darkness entered her.

Jesus then told the both of us, "Lucy. Ambrosia. Listen. While the darkness may be sealed away, you may still have things to deal with." I sighed. Oh yes, I certainly did. The darkness was gone from my body and I no longer felt strong urges to kill random people. What I did feel however, was a palpable guilt over all that I had done. Even though it was a different reality, even though in some ways it didn't matter because Jesus healed her, it still greatly disturbed me.

Seeing Sapphire look concerned, she said, "Don't worry, you have nothing to feel guilty over. You did fine." Lucy didn't seem phased, "It's not a big deal. Really. I'm just glad to finally have my own body. For so long now, it was like I was a twin who was expected to dress and act like the other. Speaking of which..." She slid off her brown dress, and rummaged through a bag, pulling out a dress that Ambrosia bought on an impulse (mostly at the urging of Lucy tempting me) but never had the nerve to wear. It was a long green ballgown that hung off the shoulder, showed the upper part of her breasts, and had slit that exposed her right leg all the way up to her upper thigh. "There," she

said, "Now I feel like a different person."

SAPPHIRE

Hearing Jesus explain that I didn't have anything to worry about didn't reassure me. I knew that every human has flaws, and just because mine weren't relevant to the situation didn't mean I didn't feel guilt of my own. Indeed, I felt a sort of survivor's guilt. I was the only one who hadn't done anything terribly wrong in this situation, so watching these two struggle with their insecurities made me feel even worse. I was an incarnation of God, like Jesus, but I was human first. There had to be something I could do to help.

Jesus gave the two of them psychotherapy, and also employed a great deal of massage techniques, explaining that humans on an instinctive level want to be touched, but have all sorts of rules about touching. But therapy begins when we put all of that aside and the person feels loved. I listened in, while acting like I was just standing nearly. It would be super embarrassing if they knew that I was just as shaken up by events as the two of them. But nothing could really relieve the need to be touched. Nevras was standing nearby as well, but he just sat and watched, apparently being turned on by seeing girls rub each other's bodies. Eventually he could take it no more, and joined in on the fun, focusing mainly on Ambrosia will ignoring Lucy and me. Look, I get that Nevras is very monogamous, but it still hurt being passed up by both Jesus and Nevras. Then Jesus noticed me and I felt her warm touch on my back and shoulders. After a few minutes of what she called therapeutic touching, she moved on to more verbal forms of therapy.

Jesus shared some of the same talking points as a typical therapist, but it was far less clinical, and far more what you'd expect from a good friend. He didn't quote Jung or Freud, he just gave a good talk. But Ambrosia was clearly wallowing in her own guilt... well, more so than I. "I just feel so sinful," she said.

AMBROSIA

Jesus asked, "Is this the day? Is today Judgement Day? Is that what you would like?" I had visions of end times with him punishing all the sinners. Noting my hesitation, he said, "Very well, Judgement

Day is upon you!" I gasped in horror, as he continued, "And here it is. Who will judge you?!?" Jesus, who before had been the picture of femininity now towered over me with a body much like Gandalf. Well, or would be if Gandalf had a body like Arnold Schwarzenegger. It looked like he could crush me with his yaoi hands, but here he was asking me a direct question that completely blindsided me. "...What?" I asked. "You heard me, " Jesus repeated, "Who is going to judge you?!?"

I sat there dumbfounded, "Wait, I thought you were going to judge me." I had read the Bible in my spare time, but I don't remember this particular exercise being mentioned. "My mother!" I blurted out, referring to the one who adopted me, "She was always scolding me. Always with the lectures about how emotional people are evil. I locked a part of myself away. I never allowed myself too feel strongly before I met Nevras." Jesus shook his head, "You mother is dead! So is your other mother, and the only thing she did was give you up. Neither of these women can accuse you." I fumbled for another name before choosing the most common one, "What about God? Doesn't he condemn my sins?" Jesus shook his head, "I and my Father are one. And I don't condemn you. You must understand that all people have sins, and the price of those sins is death. But both of us, and Sapphire over there, none of us condemn you. I died to forgive all of the sins of others. Who is judging you?" He looked at me as though he wanted me to come to a particular conclusion, but I didn't have any answers. So I did what anyone might do. I guessed, starting with Yazim Jianne as prime candidate. I knew he was up to something. He shook his head for each of these, and became more confused and anguished with each round guess. "Surely not Nevras?" I asked as he shook his head one more time, "Then who?"

Then it dawned on me, "Wait, am *I* the one judging me?" He nodded in the affirmative. The form of Jesus softened again, and he was no longer a muscular man of imposing height, Jesus looked like a kind woman with brown hair and very gentle eyes. These eyes were filled with such compassion that I broke down in tears. Jesus embraced me with a long hug before Nevras cut in. Unlike many men, Nevras

didn't get aggressive when he was jealous. He wouldn't hurt Jesus, but Nevras did want a piece of the action.

JESUS

At some point after this, Ambrosia went from receptive and vulnerable to catatonic. She didn't like the answer I had given her. When I try to help people, sometimes they delusion and self-accusations take over. I tell them "You don't need to feel bad about your dog dying," and somehow they hear, "You're not *allowed* to feel bad about your dog dying." Or hallucinations and distorted reality comes and they literally see me as intending them harm. This is particularly pronounced when they have a demon. But I can banish demons. What I cannot address is free will.

All of this would be true of most people, but Ambrosia took what I said to heart. And I am afraid that was precisely the problem. Human beings need Knowledge of Good and Evil in order to function. However, now that she saw herself as simultaneously sinful but also forgiven, her mind and heart didn't know how to cope with this information. It looked like she was trapped in a sort of paralysis where she was worried that anything new she did might further displease God. You see this choice paralysis with certain animals where a dish is set down before them from two different sides at once. Both look equally tasty and delicious, both are the same in every war, and cats being naturally indecisive, the cat starves to death trying to choose the better meal. Actually, no, this is an urban legend. But my point remains! Ambrosia had just figured out that since Adam and Eve's first disobedience, every choice was a sin, only differing in degree of sinfulness. Everything was also forgiven by me, but in the human mind, that doesn't matter so much. If everything is acceptable, everything is also meaningless. How did I know this is what she was thinking? Well, I'm God of course. But also because when I was deciding to become incarnate, I also tried several other ideas. One of these was to simply take away Knowledge of Good & Evil, only to find that humans lost all free will and ability to decide. I knew this look as one similar to what I had experienced. "Ambrosia needs medicine or she will die," I explained. Nevras looked at me angrily,

"What did you do to her?" I explained what I have told you, the audience, as clearly as possible. "...And because the Yin and Yang are unified in her mind, she can see images and creatures that other humans cannot." Tamashii blinked, "Wait, so Ambrosia now has schizophrenia? Seriously, what have you done to my mother?!?" I sighed, "I was trying to treat her guilt, but I guess I went about it the wrong way. I'm human too, remember? Anyway, there is good news. I have a cure."

Ambrosia was having some sort of intense hallucination. One of the quirks about her Oracle powers was that if her power was out of control enough, she could start projecting things. And sure enough, when she wasn't showing us flora and fauna of the astral world, she proved that she hadn't totally tuned us out as the following message appeared from thin air:

If you or a Loved One are suffering
from Catatonic Schizophrenia
Please call this number: 866-903-3787
There is Help. Operators are standing by.

Then the image faded, and she went back to seeing winged fish, and strangely colored plants and insects with odd or grotesque limbs, and furry beings floating in midair. She was deep in her own world. Elias asked, "I do hope you will not tell us that it is a suppository? Or will you lay your hands on her similar to the style of *reiki*? Is there something that we can do in order to help?" I nodded, "In a manner of speaking, yes. Some of you will have to go on a quest..."

Tamashii rang her cellphone, "Hey guys! Yes, we're back. It was intense, and it looks like Mom has some mental issues now. This Jesus guy was able to cure some of them but..." She saw that I was a bit impatient, so she said, "Hang on, lemme put you on speaker."

I said, "Right, so we're going on a quest, and you are invited if you want. Our mission is to find the Tree of Knowledge of Good & Evil, as this should cure her condition. Meet us in Kushiyama, near... well, we should be hanging around the entrance to the town anyway." Tamashii chatted with her friends before hanging up. "Wait, why is it that you cannot heal my mother anyway?" Tamashii asked me. So I

told them the story about how one night, just around when Easter came, a fox girl named Rena gave up her body in order to be with her boyfriend... erm, girlfriend Alicia. "After that," I said, "I had an immortal body and an eternal spirit. I technically can heal your mom but it is also a matter of her free will. It's also much more meaningful if you do it."

GOD

Reset. I wasn't satisfied with that scene, so we played it over until we got it just right. Oh yeah, my son did like to touch people, but there's a difference between skinship and going too far with a married woman, even if Jesus was also a woman. And so, while Jesus did my best to give her positive words, I came to Nevras the day before in a dream and tried to warn him that Ambrosia really needed a good back rub. Sapphire's part in the scene was unchanged. While Nevras was giving her a good cuddle, Jesus talked with Lucy and Ambrosia, and then saw how Sapphire longed to be touched and went ahead with it. The scene didn't make any sense now, though. Should I just consider removing it?

In any case, the rest of things, played out as before, and they were ready to search for that tree.

AMATERASU

Long ago in Ancient Japan, the universe was a shapeless sea of stars. There was a Male and a Female present over the water. His name was Izanagi ("man who invites"). She was Izanami ("woman who invites"). Izanagi and Izanami thrust a jeweled spear into the ocean, and the first land formed where the spear touched the water. This was the central island of Japan. And the two married and discovered intercourse. The first child, Hiruko, was born deformed and weak, and they later abandoned it. They decided that it was because Izanami speak first during sex. After all, men should take initiative in sex. Am I right, gals?

Anyway, many more children, each of whom represent an island and/or a *kami* nature were born. Finally, Izanami gave birth to the kami of fire, and wound up dying. She went to the underworld Yomi, where Izanagi tried to visit. She begged and pleaded Izanagi not to

look, at least not until Izanami requested to be brought back to life. He did look though, and discovered that Izanami's body was in a severe state of rot. He ran away frightened, and Izanami chased after, hoping to force Izanagi to stay in Yomi. He escaped and blocked the entrance with a large boulder. Izanagi went to the water to purify, and out came two other kami, Susano and me. Who am I? I am Amaterasu, the Sun goddess.

My brother was a storm kami and somewhat of a mess. He made such trouble that Susano was banished from the heavens. This pissed me off, and I decided to sulk for awhile. What? I was still fairly young, as immortal beings go. And so I made my way to a dark cave and rolled a boulder in front of it. Kami cannot undo the power of each other, so while I was in the cave, nobody could roll the boulder away. But when I was in the cave, depressed and sad, and unable to see any way out of things, I had managed to take the sun with me, turning what was in the sky into an extended eclipse that lasted for about three hours. Later historians would date this event to exactly April 3, 33 AD. My normally upbeat and vibrant personality was gone, as I cried my eyes out and wanted to be alone.

Now, you wouldn't think the sun being dark would be a big deal for only three hours, but you'd be wrong. For those three hours, the sun was not simply occluded like it was for above seven minutes or so during a typical eclipse, it was actually gone from the sky. For three hours, the land froze to the point where crops couldn't grow, and living beings began to die. I'm told during this exact time, something else was happening in history, but keep in mind, Ancient Japan is not even the same timeline. This happened much earlier. Nevertheless, as I went out that night, the sky was very interesting. The planets aligned to form what appeared to be the shape of a man hanging upright with his arms outstretched.

They asked me to come out when I first got depressed, and they noticed things were dying, but I was in a sulky mood, as I said. But then I rolled away the boulder when I heard a party going on outside. I wanted to be in the party! When I asked what the celebration was about, they showed me my own bright reflection. Awww guys! I was

incredibly pleased, but less so when they dragged me off to do my duty the next day. I wanted to keep partying until the sun came out.

RENA

I was pretty young when it happened. While most of the genetic hybrids died thousands or maybe even millions of years before I was born, we were in a time of turmoil. Statues were being smashed, people were being silenced for crimes of thought, and society was out of touch with reality. There were tyrants in the political sphere as well as the religious groups. Harsh laws, intolerant people, great illness, high taxes, all of these things coincided around the same years. It was a time perfect for Jesus to be born.

Now people might tell you 536 AD was scientifically the worst time to be alive, but that's a load of crap. An active volcano spewing ash doesn't even rate with the sheer amount of authoritarianism, dysfunctional religion, poverty, and disease that all happened around the same time. Worse yet, the hybrid experiment had been rediscovered, and that meant that people could expect to be hunted as a "demon" is someone gave them vaccines that made their features too animalistic.

Some of these genetic splicing technology washed ashore deposited from the ocean on dry land. By dumb luck, these things made it very people who could analyze it, and turn it into a widely used serum. They thought they could make some sort of super soldiers, so a lot of children were jabbed with this drug without even giving consent. They claimed that there was a sickness going around that this medicine would treat, but nobody that I knew was coughing or sneezing.

Before I was injected, I was a little girl named Mary from a remote town of Magdala. But after that, the scientists called me Rena, meaning "Fox." I developed ears and tail of a fox, which led to my being hunted by people with hounds. It also led to me being unable to remain at home, as it wasn't safe for me there. I was a wandering mostly homeless girl, sick with the side-effects of the vaccine, and possessed by seven demons. That is to say, as a foxgirl, I had grown seven tails (which later increased to nine). It was then that he came.

He called me by name. He didn't make me human, but rather healed my side-effects and made me stronger. While the rest of the world thought I was demon-possessed, he gave me a purpose and a place to live.

Chapter 14

In which the A-Team is assembled. I pity the fool who messes with them!

TAMASHII

A couple of hours later, my friends showed up. With them present, we made a decision who would stay to watch after Ambrosia, and who were going to leave in order to find the Tree of Knowledge of Good & Evil. Sapphire stayed with Ambrosia, explaining that her powers were for healing, and she wanted to stay in case things go worse.

Of the original team, obviously Ambrosia couldn't go. As for the others, well... Michael said, "Let the younger generation handle this. I am certain there won't be too much danger." Aqorm similarly refused, explaining that she now had ties to the elves, having been made a full elf. "I kinda sorta also have to work to pay them off for the surgery," she mumbled. Lilith simply said, "Don't wanna." Azrael and Zoe were kissing and cuddling over in a corner, and then walked off into a nearby storage house. Unfortunately for me, I was more savvy than most nine year olds, having witnessed my own parents go at it loudly in my own house. That kind of mental image stays with you, so yes, I knew what those two were up to. "Personally, I'd like to watch to see if Ambrosia dies," Yazim Jianne said. Oh stop denying it, you big softie! I know you secretly care about her. At least, I think you do? Anyway, Selqui and Yazim Jianne were joined at the hip, so I didn't even need to ask. That just left Elias, "Ambrosia being left with the likes of Lilith and Yazim Jianne? Someone has to make sure that that they don't try anything. Besides, I have research to tend to."

Nevras agreed to supervise the trip, "It looks like Portia, Sastraneth, and Tamashii are going, so we need a responsible adult." Lucy also spoke up, "If you're going, I'm going too!" Noting his shocked stare, she said, "What? I can be responsible too! Besides, Ambrosia can't be here, so I'm gonna make sure that you don't wind up lonely." With that, the five of us boarded the ship. I wasn't hopeful.

RENA

Jesus invited me as his disciple. He gave me the name Judas Iscariot, a boy's name, telling me that many would persecute his followers, and that for the time being disguising my real name and gender, as well as the town I from would help me stay free from harm. It worked, while many of the human followers died a martyr's death, I was able to fake my death and stay alive for awhile. I gradually understood his teachings, and taught them to others. The town that he picked could have been better though. Iscariot referred to a town mostly populated historically by the Amorites. I was not his only follower though.

Jesus was walking past John the Baptist, an extremely zealous Hebrew who wore camel hair jackets to show that the Jews around him had betrayed their traditions. He was teaching people, baptizing with water, and condemning the religious leaders of his day when two of his followers were with them. When Jesus walked nearby, he pointed Jesus out, naming him as the "Lamb of God." Now these two followers appeared as two generic looking men, but they were under a Glamour. In those days, hybrids were no different from regular humans and had no magic of their own, but one of them was not a hybrid but an angel. The one Jesus called Andrew was an elf girl named Aellisa, and the angel named Peniel was later called Phillip by Jesus. In addition to be a follower of John, "Andrew" was also a fisher by trade and worked with another hybrid, a girl named Autumntwig. These two were called brothers as a joke, because they tended to be very close, and were both very tomboyish. Back then, there weren't many opportunities for women who were hybrids to be married, so they wound up working rough jobs. Which helps explain why two other "brothers", a mermaid named Marina and a dryad named Arboria were also working the boats. These four were absolute outcasts, only managing to scrape by because of the fish they caught. But that life was swiftly coming to an end. Aellisa (Andrew) was telling Autumntwig about Jesus, but she had no interest. During a long fishing trip with the four of them, nothing was caught. They were going to be ruined, a group of penniless hybrids having gotten over

the symptoms of their genetic alterations only to die on the streets. Then Jesus showed up by the coast. He got aboard the ship, and asked the two to go out again, this time slightly further. Autumntwig protested. Firstly, Jesus was clearly a rabbi, and as such, it was considered forbidden for him to be near unclean people like them. Second, she had been out all night with the others and had caught nothing. The best catches were typically done at night, so if the schools of fish were nowhere to be found then, it was impossible. But she did as he said. The nets swelled up with two boatloads full of fish, and they had trouble making it back.

While all this went on, I was wearing from the shore, wearing a long dress and had a wig to cover my natural hair and my fox ears. My tails were tucked under the dress and were fortunately just short enough to pull this off. Otherwise, I would have had to wear some kind of hooded cloak. My current outfit was conspicuous enough on a beach like this, but as Jesus not widely known, nobody thought some strange woman on the beach was connected to him. The wig I was wearing was called a *sheitel*, they were a more recent addition to Jewish law. The old ways of the Hebrews were getting bogged down by all these new rabbinical customs, but it was a fortunate thing. Jesus could just walk into the store and tell the owner, "I am buying a wig for a woman who is dear to me," and nobody thought to ask whether it was actually for his wife or to preserve the modesty of a foxgirl hybrid, who nobody before that thought to even ask if I had any modesty. I don't have much though. Originally I had long black hair, but it turned white when I was infused with white fox genes, but now the wig I wore made me feel like myself again. It was a nice gift. Later I would learn to braid my hair and tuck it neatly under a *yarmulke*, bind my breasts with cloth, and dress as a boy. But for now, this is what I wore. I was too far away to see how they caught the fish, but I saw them haul it back. Jesus named Marina as James and Arboria was now John, the "sons" of thunder, as back then they were always arguing. He waited until later to call Autumntwig the name Peter. As for the catch, they walked away from it when he offered them discipleship. Their father-figure Zebedee took care of

their debts.

We then found out that a dwarven winemaker in Cana named Umber who Jesus named Thomas. There was a wedding feast going on, and they had run out of wine, since many unexpected guests came. Instead of being shamed for his underpreparation though, Jesus turned the water into wine, allowing Thomas to save his reputation.

Then there was a female elf named Sa'asha who had been drafted as a stonemason to build not-so-great structures. While elves were known as fine artisans by future generations, Sa'asha was not valued for her work. They set her to work building a cesspit, nothing of any great value. But Jesus showed how to make a simple toilet instead, and helped with the carpentry of making a door so people could actually get some privacy when they did their business. In any case, this so astonished the elf who Jesus named Thaddeus that she dropped everything like the others.

AQORM

One time my parents showed me a family tree. Since elves have very long lifespans (to the point that there are rumors that they can't die of old age), and because the window that they can have children is smaller, their family trees tend to be less dense when compared to humans. So it was easy to spot both Aellisa and Sa'asha in my maternal and paternal ancestry. The lines finally merged with my parents. Before I saw that, and hear the explanation, I always thought there was something impure about my blood that made me a half-elf. But my bloodline dated back to two elf bloodlines that were both part of this historic and religious event.

RENA

Philip also found a follower for Jesus. There was an architect named Nathanael responsible for a great structure, but although he had good plans, he was cursed with incompetent workers. The failure of the structure was blamed on this man, and he was fired. He spent the rest of the day bemoaning his fortune under a fig tree, asking God why it seemed he had turned his back on him. The Philip came and told him of Jesus of Nazareth. "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" he scoffed. Philip told him to go see anyway, and Jesus

referenced how honest he was, which freaked him out that he seemed so familiar. But Jesus gained him as a follower when he explained that he had seen him under the fig tree.

Jesus also met a temple singer named James (Jesus only called him James the Lesser, because there was already a James). He was leading the singing for Sabbath, in the middle of a song called *Ashira l'Adonai*, when Jesus created an uproar be translation his song into all existing languages. The Jews of the time were of the opinion that such songs shouldn't be sung in any language but Hebrew, ignoring the miracle that he was able to speak such languages.

Then there was Matthew, a tax collector for the enemies of the Jews. During the height of the tax season, Jesus suddenly told him to "Come and follow," and he dropped everything. This caused another uproar, but eventually they were able to find someone new to tax people.

Lastly, while I wasn't watching, Jesus met a demon who I later discovered was Lilith's ancestor. But of course, her entire family got killed because she had a soul, a threat to order in Hell. I don't honestly know what happened between Jesus and the one he called Simon, but it seemed like he was one of the Zealots, a group of Hebrew people who were deeply nationalistic and dedicated to trying to set their nation free.

Soon all of his twelve disciples were gathered. Jesus had plenty of other followers, but we were special. He sent us out, two by two, to be representatives of him. He told us that we were to take no extra belongings, not a staff, nor an extra cloak, nor even a bag of money. We were to spread a message of forgiveness and acceptance. This isn't to be confused with the wishy-washy message that "I'm okay and you're okay" but rather the teaching that all of us are in fact sinners, but we have nothing to fear in this life because God didn't come to forgive us but to die for us. But at the time, we literally had only the vaguest idea of what to preach to the people. Just that most of us were people who didn't belong, and Jesus had in practically every case shown us how our way didn't work but Jesus had loved us anyway. In addition to that rather unclear message, Jesus gave us power. And not just us. The racial abilities of the hybrids had begun to sprout forth,

not just among the disciples but even among elves or the like living in scattered regions in the outskirts. It wasn't like all mermaids or gnomes had such powers though, it was like God scattered seeds, and some grew and some didn't. It wasn't just racial abilities though, the powers of thaumaturgy came to humans.

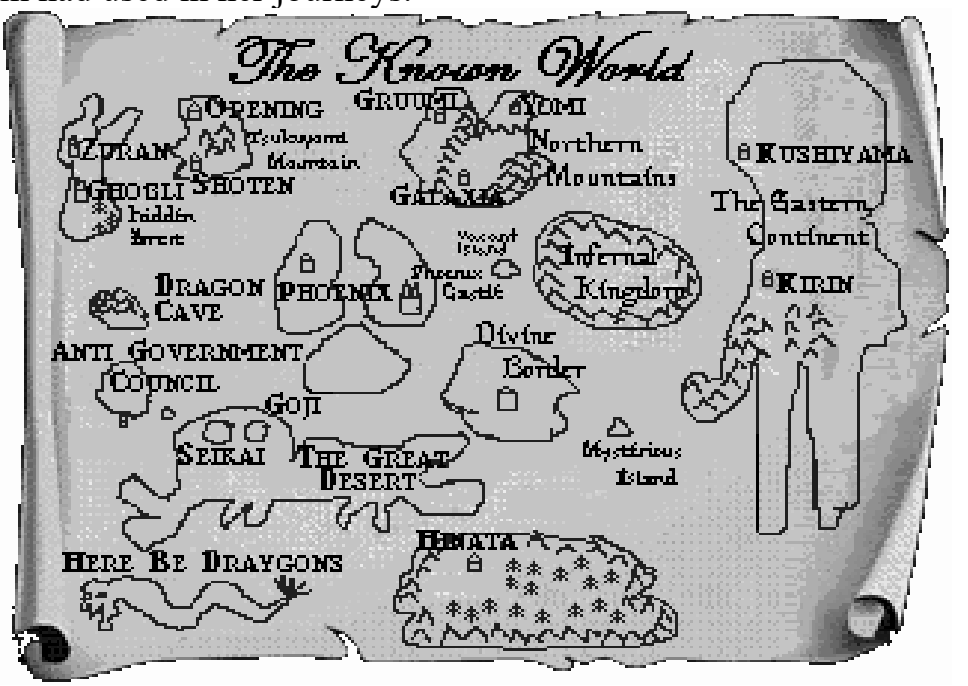
I traveled with Simon the Zealot, and we wound up healing people. The blind, the mute, and the lame seemed to be our typical targets. And lepers. I noticed him getting uncomfortable, which seemed unthinkable for a demon. I guessed, and decided that it must have something to do with how demons disguised themselves. If they were possessing someone, their demonic energy eventually decayed the flesh of whoever they were possessing. Yeah, that must be it.

Chapter 15

In which Jesus cures lameness, and rocks are apparently buoyant

TAMASHII

I asked, "Alright, so you say that we need the Knowledge of Good & Evil from the fruit of the Tree in the Garden of Eden. But ummm, where exactly is it on this map?" And I pulled out a world map that Mom had used in her journeys.



Jesus took a look and then said, "Okay, you see how we're right here in Kushiyama?" Jesus pointed to the town near the top right, then traced with his finger all the way down to the bottom left. "It reads «Here Be Draygons» (sic) there though," I said, "Are you sure you want me to go there?" Jesus explained, "Yes, that's right. This area, obviously, has not been explored by any mapmakers. Until a certain event in history, the island containing Eden and the Knowledge of Good & Evil wasn't even visible. That area was just a sort of wave triangle."

I was puzzled, "What could have changed to reveal an entire island?" Jesus told us plainly, "Your mother changed the world when she made it real." I looked over at Mom. She was still catatonic, but our words were still affecting her, as I saw a heavy blush cross her face. From my own medical research, I knew that schizophrenic people were perfectly capable of hearing the world that we live in.

Ages ago, psychologists weren't trained to consider the possibility that the patient might not be crazy. They were trained to help the patient "get better," so any suggestion that the patient might actually be, for example, hearing voices outside of themselves will never be considered. But in this world, when magic existed and demonic, angelic, or ghostly possession were legitimately known about, nothing was discounted. My own powers as a Soulfire allowed me to connect with disturbed people who I touched, but there was a real art to treating them. If I tried it, I would wind up sucked into her mindset and be struggling along with her, unable to break free of what I saw or heard. About all I could do was calm Mom with a touch. Her condition remained. I gave her one more touch, making her pass out so she would not have to watch us leave her.

And then, we boarded the ship. I grabbed Ambrosia's map and stuck it in my satchel, and then Dad, Portia, Sastraneth, and I boarded the ship. We raised anchor, unfurled the sails, and headed out. Although it was possible for Bahamut to take us there quickly, we didn't know what we were looking for. If it was a small island, we might even pass it by from the air. Besides, the ship had all of our supplies, including fruit and pickled vegetables. I didn't fancy flying around aimlessly

with no provisions.

But there was another reason not to fly. The New Earth had changed quickly since Mom was a child. After the war between Phoenix and Kushiyama, nobody wanted one country to invade another, so there was limited air traffic control. These were mostly guards in hot air balloons using magic to shoot down flying objects, but occasionally you got the heavier duty version of this. That one involved big blimps with cannons or ballistas. While Bahamut's scales were capable of making runes slide off of her, heavy weapons were still able to knock her back. It didn't really hurt Bahamut seriously, but with us on her, it wasn't so safe. After all, it's one thing to be a large dragon and fall from a height with scales and muscles large enough to cushion her body, it's quite another to be a human riding on such a dragon and fall from this height. Even though she was taking the damage directly and we were only getting secondary damage, we'd be dead while she'd be bruised. Without permission, we couldn't just wander up and down the map hoping to find it the island.

But not everyone in the group was pleased with riding in the boat. Sastraneth was a strong swimmer and often got seasick. She could only cope with the motion sickness while sleeping, and she was too restless to do this the entire trip. And so, while the boat sailed along, she kept pace with it, swimming for several days straight, then resting aboard the ship, only to dive into the ocean again.

JESUS

I started my mission to heal the land of Pangaea. I cured the blind, lame, and so on and my disciples were sent out to do the same. While my disciples wandered the land, each had their share of challenges. Thomas and Thaddeus were paired, even though elves and dwarves classically do not get along with each other. Nathanael and Philip, James and John, and Peter (who at this point was still called Autumntwig) and Andrew all were old friends but they were sent on difficult missions. James the Lesser and Matthew were the only group that was entirely made up of humans, but I sent them to ghettos where a growing number of hybrids who had been persecuted had settled. I never said missionary work was easy.

But my most troublesome group were Judas (Rena) and Simon the Zealot. They didn't understand each other, as Rena had been abused by medical science as a young child, while the demons were those who sought to support their military power and to create unrest after seeing that would fail. Demons were often driven by violence, while as a foxgirl Rena spent her life running and hiding. Rena was able to heal others, while his demonic powers seemed to qualify him only as a bouncer. And then there was his reaction to some of the healing itself, where he cringed and trembled, as she reported later. She insisted that he shouldn't belong in this group, but I told Rena that none of them should see themselves as greater or others as lesser (aside from James the Lesser, who was literally called James the Lesser, but I insisted they not take that as measure of his worth), and that at any time, one of them might betray me. That seemed awfully paranoid, I know, but I knew what would happen to me.

And no, despite what Rena thinks, Simon's issue wasn't the lepers. He couldn't get past watching the lame be healed. You see, Simon had grown up in a small town, a strong demon who was orphaned in one of the many wars between demons and angels. The battles were pointless, for every demon who was killed was the other half of some angel. Except the occasional Seraphim, there were no losses and nothing about this could be called a win. He grew up in an orphanage, seeing humans as his brothers and sisters. Then the occupying troops rolled through to oppress Ancient Israel, and one of their vehicles smashed the legs of a fellow orphan. The poor kid became like a brother to him as he nursed him back to good health. But his legs were totaled, and it seemed as though he would never walk again. Simon swore revenge, and though the Jews were frightened of him as a demon, he was a little like Hellboy, a demon that nonetheless wanted to fight on their side. And so, when Simon wanted to join the Zealots, he found none to refuse him. Day after day, he practiced and prayed and trained. Then the day was coming, an important official in the oppressing army was coming, and they had a little skit, setting up several people to react just so in order to get him into position of assassination. But that day, in the same town, the boy from the

orphanage was at a pool of Siloam. He was kinda whiny actually, complaining about how his legs were broken, and he was waiting for someone to move him into the pool, as periodically an angel would stir up the waters (actually, it was a hot spring with intermittent flow). Actually, I had regrown the bones of his leg as soon as I saw him, but he was still carrying on like some sort of socialist loafer on welfare. Dude, your leg has been healed! Why haven't you noticed yet? Finally, I told him, "Do you want to be healed?" He told me some more about how people kept pushing in front of him in the pool, but I brushed this aside, "Your childhood friend from the orphanage is here in town. But he will leave forever if you do not hurry. Move your bed mat and walk." His faith made him well. This motivated him in a hurry, and soon he was on his feet, before realizing that his feet actually worked.

The carefully orchestrated skit suddenly fell apart about the point when he showed up on the scene. The other players had all done their part, but here was something real. Simon walked off, and sought after me. In the next few days, he found me from a limited description from the friend.

GOD

Most humans go through life as though actors in a play. I gave them existence, so they are obviously part of me, but they like to pretend as though they are a separate existence. Then they die, go to the Afterlife, and briefly touch into unity with me before becoming souls again, and being reborn. But Jesus was different.

I recall watching a stage play called *Noises Off*. This play showed the audience the front of the stage and the backstage, and obviously it was a farce that emphasized the challenges of productions. But in this particular night, the actor who played the stage manager became sick, and wound up being replaced by an understudy, a gal who was the *actual* stage manager. In other words, for most of the play, she was dramatic but she wasn't acting.

I also could compare him to Neo in *The Matrix*, and how he just ignored the virtual reality program entirely, as though it didn't exist. In any case, Jesus promised to have great potential, and I had plans for

him. The other humans were caught in sin, while Jesus could see through reality, and thus was a candidate to overcome sin. I was proud of what Jesus would do.

And so it was that Jesus was able to walk on water. His faith was more real than the water was, and so he was able to walk on its surface, just as I was able to walk upon the waters of the Void.

RENA

After we returned from our mission trip, Jesus was suddenly popular. Like, "bigger than the Beatles" popular. He told us to get away in the boat because he was worried the crowd might push us to the ground trying to get to him. But I was worried the crowd might be too much for him. He said that he was headed to pray and be alone, so we left him to it.

Then a storm came up, and the lot of us were reciting hastily remembered prayers to bail out the boat, and push water away from it. But wind and water were coming from all sides, with constant downpour and strong wind pushing waves in faster than we could bail it. It stopped raining, so we stopped needing to bail, but the wind and waves were pushing so hard that we were stuck in place. And then, Jesus moved along the surface of the waves. Thaumaturgy could do this. So could ninjutsu. But if it were ninjutsu, we would see a glowing blue aura near Jesus's feet. And if it were thaumaturgy, he would be chanting, "*You who are Lord over the natural world, let me overcome this water. Water Walking...*" at a constant rate. Even the best of these wouldn't be able to sustain either more than about fifteen minutes. Enough to cross a pool or even a large river, but not a lake 13 miles long by 8 miles wide, and we were halfway across it.

Autumntwig, who was still not yet known as Peter, wanted to come out on the water. Jesus asked her to go ahead and try. And she did, focusing on chanting those words, while she worked to figure out precisely how Jesus was doing this. But she never managed it, as well she was chanting, she was becoming more tired and distracted and then the rough waves caused her to gasp in fear. She stopped chanting for just a few seconds but it it was enough. She suddenly sunk like a stone, and might have drowned by for Jesus reaching a hand down to

her. Also calmed the storm to some extent, and we made it to the other side. Jesus's mission took him away from this area for awhile so it was abandoned.

Jesus picked this time to explain that Autumntwig's name Peter, explaining that he was to be the rock on which he would build his church. Uhhhhh, rocks can't float. They don't have any buoyancy. Was Jesus teasing us?

GOD

The Sea of Galilee underwent a number of droughts and other issues over the years, at one point nearly drying up during a severe drought and over-irrigation. There was a legitimate concern that the lake that Jesus walked across would permanently be dry enough for anyone to walk across, not just the Messiah. It was predicted to replenish only with a lot of pumping, expected to manage by 2026. But that very year, a combination of environmental stewardship and a heavy rainstorm, the water level went from the black line of irreversible drain to just short of the red flood line (that was me, by the way).

Meanwhile, that boat they left behind? In 1986, during another drought, the wreckage of boat they named the Jesus Boat was found.

Chapter 16

In which the land is transfigured by the evening sun

TAMASHII

We cut south along the coast to try to get close to our destination, seeing land a lot less than normal. Dad and I weren't great navigators, so this seemed the best was of being certain we were traveling correctly. So anyway, several days of sailing, I was pretty tired and out of it. Day after day of eating preserved fruit, pickled vegetables, and fish. And more fish. The ship had a Preserver (what you people might call a "fridge" except ours ran on temporal magic, and risked the destruction of the universe) but we'd forgotten to stock it with anything besides milk and some fruit. We'd eaten that up on the first morning. Ambrosia on the other hand, had tried her hand at just every preservation method known to man. There were casks of rum and whiskey, there were ceramic jars of kimchi, natto, pickles olives, there were vegetables and meats preserved in oil, there were jars of jellies

and fruit preserves (mostly marmalade since Mom loved oranges), there was *garum* (the equivalent of a fish sauce) made from all the fish we had on board, a type of sauerkraut called *curtido*, something called *meigan cai* made from mustard or cabbage greens, salami hanging from the ceiling, and various cheeses of different animals and stinkiness levels put in jars and zip-lock bags. Of cheeses, we had smoked provolone, brine soaked feta, limburgher in a thick glass jar, and some nice brie wrapped in dried leaves.

We had only a small amount of fresh food, that had already been consumed, but we had an orgy of jellied, pickled, brewed, and fermented food that gave us strong flavors of salty, sour, and sweet. But it was definitely a problem of mold in these closed containers (in particular, the alcohol kept getting mold from the "angels share" and we'd have to scrub down the ship with bleach), as all of Ambrosia's hard work and planning had perversely created this problem. And as much as we wanted it to, this food would only last until we ate it. The salami was gone, the natto was gone, and the greens were roughly half of what we originally had. The bread was gone too. Eventually, all we would have is marmalade and fish. Then just the fish. We'd be malnourished just before we starved. I'd like to say that we had our rations under control, but Lucy was not nearly as responsible about resources as Ambrosia. And without some of the other crew members, food and waste management was flawed. If we didn't find our Eden, we were doomed.

We resorted to dumping our body waste off the ship since the commode was down, and Elias wasn't there to fix it. We were often sick, but thankfully, the ship's water purifier worked, so we weren't drinking our own fecal matter or something. I stared out at the sea with a listless look. "Why don't you talk to your friends?" asked Nevras. But I was in a mood, and didn't want to burden them with my drama. I also was seasick, and didn't want to risk throwing up all over them. I wound up getting in a heated argument with my father, because at the time, the fact that they were my friends didn't matter, I just wanted to be left alone. Later though, my friends did kinda hang out with me. I eventually made up with my dad, talking it out and

explaining calmly why I was so resistant in the first place. We hung out and I drank my first alcohol with my dad. I was only nine, but there were no laws against it. He wasn't a heavy drinker, but it was kind of a sign that today he saw me as an adult. I didn't get all sloppy, angry, or anything like that. The alcohol just made me pass out. Unfortunately, as a Soulfire, I shouldn't drink like ever, and nearly wrecked the ship with my powers. Thankfully, there were some systems to harness such energies, so the turbulent psionic storm didn't smash the thing apart outright.

The others woke me up after a very rough night. They were looking exhausted. "Hey kiddo," Lucy waved to me, "How about we stop on that island over there? If you're anything like me, you're bored out of your skull and wanting to get on dry land."

She had a point. All of us were nervous wrecks, and all of us had enough of the rocking of the boat for the time being. But that island represented a grim reminder of Ambrosia's quest and how it had ruined this family as far as I was concerned. Mysterious Island was where the portal to Belial's Castle had been, those years ago. If she hadn't gone on trips like this, Mom would never be in this mess. "Nuhhh," I said, "Mysterious Island sucks."

Unlike Nevras, Lucy didn't really argue. She didn't guilt trip me like Mom either. No, she did worse. She gave me huge puppy dog eyes, and told me, "But Mysterious Island was the portal to where Nevras and I had sex on the mountain. Without me finally merging with Ambrosia, she would never have been honest about her feelings, we wouldn't have had the best night ever, and you wouldn't have been born. So you see, Mysterious Island is a place filled with wonder."

Whoa, Other Mom, too much information! I sighed, powerless against the cute pet eyes, "Oh all right! We'll stop there and walk around at least." But she kept working on me until I had agreed to see the top of the mountain at dusk. Lucy wasn't exactly manipulative, though it sounds that way. She didn't really mind if I didn't, but typically her ideas tended to be fun or enriching. Though Ambrosia thought she was the worst part of her, in some ways she was the best, as she went ahead with impulsive decisions that were often based on

personal growth. And let's be honest. Even though it was a hard climb up the mountain, it was good exercise, and the view was worth it.

And so, we headed up the mountain. Lucy got Nevras to dress in a red, green, and white plaid wool skirt with a fluffy green tone sleeveless sweater. To complete the look, Lucy gave Nevras some padding, a sports bra, some bike shorts, knee high leggings, and some comfortable sandals without heels. "I'm not done yet," Lucy said. Ambrosia and Nevras normally both applied fairly modest makeup. But Lucy plucked Nevras's eyebrows to a thin line, added mascara to define the eyelashes, and enhanced earlier Nevras's attempt at makeup with a little more lipstick and blush. "Mostly okay job," she said, "You don't look like a drag queen or anything. But I think you can be more confident." Nevras normally used his own hair, which had grown out over the years, but Lucy pulled out a chestnut brown wig (more impulse shopping) and combed and tucked his hair into a wig cap, then fastened and clipped the wig. Lucy squealed at the look, something that would be way more of a reaction that Ambrosia would ever be caught doing. Mom at best gave a deep blush, and would say in a deadpan, "That looks great."

Originally, Nevras had made a big fuss about crossdressing, but after the whole macho bravado had worn off, and he stopped objecting had been outed. Ambrosia could get him to dress up fairly easily, though he still had trouble doing so on his own initiative, Nevras still had sensible taste, and tended not to wear things that were too goth or absurdly formal along the street. In any case, Nevras looked demure yet comfortable in this outfit. That is to say, if a random person saw Nevras, they would not be able to tell the difference between Nevras and a girl who had been raised from birth to be ladylike. But at the same time, Nevras was wearing clothes that suited the climb up the mountain.

We made it to the top, and looked at the view. I could see the clouds above, the sea for miles, and the next land hundreds of miles into the distance. The next island was the Divine Border, a land that led directly to the cloudy soil of Heaven. I saw the clouds floating low, then spiraling up like a staircase into a series of cloudy islands. I

couldn't make out the buildings over there, but we got our bearings as to the next destination. The view was spectacular, but as we waited the dusk sun turned the landscape almost a brilliant golden color. The distant clouds refracted light like a prism, and the autumn leaves exploded in bright hues. While we couldn't see the buildings, we certainly could see the plants from over there. And then as the sun set, bioluminescent algae set the sea aglow. We walked down the mountain with the moon out brightly, and rested in the cabins of out boat.

RENA

We went up to a mountain with Jesus because he wanted to pray, when his entire shone with an intense inner light. All of a sudden, we saw him standing together with Moses and Elijah. He was chatting together with them, when I asked him "Why not set up booths for Moses and Elijah?" I was referring to the Sukkot tradition where God dwelt in a booth. All at once, I heard a voice, *This is my beloved son. Listen to him!* And then Moses and Elijah were gone, and we came down from the mountain to deal with stupid shit.

In later texts of this event, I decided I didn't wanna take the credit, and since Peter was fond of doing stupid things, I shifted the hero of this story (Autumntwig still gives me a hard time for that). I had a good reason for claiming not to be there. I was branded as a traitor (some of this was actually my own doing), so in many cases I used my given name Mary Magdalene to distinguish myself from the traitor persona that had developed. To tell the truth, all of us had betrayed him at some point.

But it was not the only time that he appeared transformed. After... a certain event, I went with some other women to visit someone's tomb. But instead we saw Jesus in a form that we couldn't even recognize. I even thought he was a gardener. Around that same time, people were walking on a road mourning this famous person's death, and Jesus came in disguise and discussed it with them. They literally didn't recognize Jesus until he ate bread and drank wine with him.

Chapter 17

In which the group is thwarted by warding sutras of red tape

LUCY

Having seen the Divine Border while looking from the mountaintop, when we went down to the bottom we navigated towards that. But of course, the horizon lowered coming down, so we weren't sure for awhile that we were on the right course. As it was, I may have complained bitterly about being lost. I got Nevras to comfort me, and tell me that things were gonna be okay.

Portia and Sastraneth came up to deck from being absent the whole last chapter. Apparently, Portia was healing Sastra, who had woken up with extreme seasickness. She had explosive nausea, which threatened to coat the ship in Hellfire. But Portia was a Seraphim, and she could handle her.

Weeks passed, as the view from up there had been further than it appeared. We had supplies, but by the time we reached the Divine Border, we were hoping to restock.

Ambrosia had bottled a lot of marmalade, so none of us would get scurvy. Thoughtful of her, because this trip was turning out to be longer than I thought. Aside from that, we had some bread, salted fish, pickled veggies in vinegar, cured meat, some very dry cheese. I cooked everyone a nice panini using the fish and cheese the first night, but now we had no source of calcium, as we were out of milk, yogurt, and cheese. Next, we would be out of protein, the way fish supplies were looking. And what we had of bread was starting to mold anyway, despite our attempts to ration. No carbs meant no energy. And we couldn't just eat sugary marmalade all day, not if we wanted to stay non-diabetic. I might not be as responsible a parent as Nevras or Ambrosia, but even I knew that one.

So I sighed in relief when Tamashii called out, "Land ho!" from the crow's nest. "I am not!" I responded, causing her to smirk. We were at our destination. Now, Heaven is filled with many plants and animals, but they tend to be lacking in cattle, pigs, or fish. But if you want fried chicken, they certainly know about it. The problem is, in order to get supplies from Heaven we had to pass a checkpoint.

I tried just pushing past the gate but was knocked back as the guards laughed. "You might want a Passport in order to enter," they said. I

thought Ambrosia had a Passport! I checked my old dress, the brown one I swapped out for this one, but nothing was in any of the pockets. Nor was it in any of the bags that she had. When we split into three people, everything we owned was supposed to split with us. Why did that not also come along with me?

I headed right, and entered the office building. After explaining my situation to guy at the front desk, he said without looking up, "Divine Passports are a minor Artifact. You should not expect them to replicate with you, in the event of a doppelganger effect. I gather you also lack any magical items or First Materials, do you?" I fished through the bags, and realized he was right. Ambrosia's fishing rod and her knife were also missing from my supplies. "So... can I have a Passport issued to me?" I asked. Without looking up still, he explained, "In order to apply for a Divine Passport, you need to fill an DP-712 Section 64A. Waiting period is typically six to eight months." I complained, "But my other self got it immediately!" As he slid the form towards me, he looked up briefly, "Ah yes, your alternate is Ambrosia Brahman. I have her on file. Yes, she got a rush order in exchange for dealing with a problematic incident. Are you willing to likewise deal with our affairs?" I shook my head, "Fuck no! I have my own business to take care of. Just give me the form." I filled out my name, only to realize that as a new being, I actually didn't have an address. I pointed to it, and he wrote some runes in the line. The mail of New Earth had a tracked address option, so I had confidence that even if I was on a rock in the middle of the sea or underground, they would find me. But for now, getting supplies here was not happening.

JESUS

I did my best to spread my message. I healed the sick, preached, even raised the dead once or twice. But what I encountered was later discussed by a writer commenting on the difference between a Sage and a Bureaucrat. The Jewish leaders ignored the older Hebrew teachings in favor of a bunch of man-made laws. They had forgotten, for instance, that the Sabbath was arranged as a day of rest, a personal day off. Instead of punishing those who arranged work to be hard enough that people felt they had to work on the Sabbath, they

punished people working on the Sabbath. That's like punishing people for owning drugs to use, when dealers are actively selling the stuff. They punished people for having tax money to the state (such coins were a profane object and not welcome in their temple), but also sought to trap me with a question about whether or not it was lawful to pay taxes. But mostly, they would go after me because I healed on the Sabbath. I was trying to tell them that the purpose of the law was mercy not sacrifice, but they didn't listen.

There are some things you should know though. In Pangaea, the ruling authority was not Rome. It was a nation that sank into the sea, now known as Atlantis. The current city of Aquamundo is filled with people who followed me. The city of Atlantis eventually fell into decline, though it is still standing. It had to be walled off, because its enemies attacked in submarines. But the Atlanteans weren't the ones running the show. Pulling their strings were the lizard people, the enemy of free citizens everywhere. They in turn were often controlled by demons, although if you asked them (if you could get them to be honest), they would be convinced they were the ones with power. This multi-layer puppet show resulted in a lot of human misery. The lizard people, as mentioned earlier, desired human sacrifice as a food source. Since blood sacrifices were no longer socially acceptable, the way they managed this was through taxes and regulation, and by using a crematorium to cook up fresh human corpses before replacing it with generic ashes. Well, technically, they did leave the bones for burning, but the bodies were eaten. Nevertheless, even though these taxes caused human death, I never told the Pharisees that taxes were evil, just that their first priority ought to be God. But these taxes did feed creatures who had to eat, even if their food was not the same as that eaten by most humans.

I should also tell you that this Ancient Earth had no Maccabean Revolt or Babylonian Exile. So the writings of these Hebrews was different from that of the later Jews by several key features. In particular, many prophets wrote of the Messiah in terms of a military leader that would rescue them from their enemies. Those texts never existed in Ancient Israel, so my message was able to be heard without

a lot of doctrinal reasons why they thought I wasn't the Messiah.

Lastly, I was able to banish demons in Ancient Israel. Rena later spread my story by posing as me on the cross, but in that case, the world had serious trouble changing because of a large number of demons. They all convinced people what they had seen was a lie, or they distorted the message.

RENA

We were with Jesus one day, when a creepy man possessed by a demon showed up. Well, maybe *a* demon is an oversimplification. He was possessed by thousands of demons, and his name was Legion. As demons had a solid body but a spirit that wasn't quite right, they could possess living humans and take their bodies. It was common practice for high level priests to perform an Exorcism. Exorcisms had varying effectiveness depending on how corporeal the creature was. Demons were notoriously hard to exorcise, but some talented priests could do so. But that wasn't the impressive part.

Legion saw that he was going to be exorcised, and his demonic energy would be obliterated. But he begged for mercy, and the demons were instead set upon a group of pigs, who drowned into the sea. Exorcism wasn't something that people could control. But Jesus did so, like it was nothing!

More impressive still was his mercy. Who was this man, who even forgave the sins of demons? Demons, who created much of human misery, who possessed everything from street people to politicians, demons who often kept people living on the outskirts or pushed them to suicide. And yet, Jesus wanted redemption even for them! Who was this man that I traveled with?!?

Chapter 18

In which everyone has a rendezvous with the Deep State

LUCY

I sighed heavily. Nevras and I had hung around a lot lately. We were on a boat together after all, and brooding silence could only get so far before we had to break down and talk. There were loads of conversations we had but the author is being lazy so I'll let readers and screenwriters alike decide what we talked about. I think Nevras was

okay talking to me because it wasn't even like talking to sisters or twins but the same person. I was Ambrosia in every way that counted, if one looked past the purple hair and darker eyes. I used to look downright evil, especially around the eye area, but Jesus had cleaned some of that up when he pulled me from Ambrosia's body. She was the real evil one, with all of her deadpan conversations. I started mumbling to myself, when Tamashii patted me on the shoulder, and asked if I was okay. I let got of my grievances. Ambrosia was herself, and I was me after all.

Though I couldn't help but be jealous. Even though I was the warmer and more sociable one, he seemed to prefer her to me. I didn't understand him. How could he love her when he had me? Who was this man that I traveled with?!?

NEVRAS

I sighed heavily. I was in another cabin thinking about things. Lucy approached me again yesterday, and asked me to explain ska music, and the conversation eventually led somehow to Second Temple Judaism. Lucy had smarts and charisma that I knew Ambrosia also had, but wasn't in touch with.

It wasn't that I love Lucy less or more than Ambrosia. I knew that I love Lucy just as much, because they are the same person. Everything I love about Ambrosia, I love because she is part of a whole person, and Lucy is another part. Hell, I could count Sapphire too, but there is something unrelatable to most people about God. They subconsciously think of God is some sort of impersonal spirit, whether or not that's true.

It was just... even though I knew Ambrosia and Lucy were the same person, I didn't see this as the same thing. My dad was always only interested in one woman, and it seemed like I would be too. But here was a *different* same woman, and as much as I'd like to say that I would remain faithful forever, I think everyone fails at marriage in some way. Some men are faithful, but don't work very hard and drink beer all day while the wife has to support everyone and clean the house. Others have annoying habits. Still others are affectionate to the wife but not good with children. There are better or worse husbands,

but I am afraid that no perfect husbands exist, at least not that I have seen. Maybe I'm wrong, there was that one guy I met at a club who seemed to have it all together. He was probably gay or unmarried though, so maybe not. That guy was awesome though.

I told myself I wouldn't fall for Lucy, and that was that! Really. I mean it.

I eventually stopped brooding long enough to realize that nobody was steering the ship, and it was a good thing too, because in taking a course that passed between the southern island of Phoenix and the northern part of the octopus-like island that comprised Goji, the now defunct town of Seikai, and the outskirt village of Qurac, we had overlooked on small but significant island made of solid rock. I turned just barely in time, and then noticed I was heading instead for the island where the Anti-Government Council convened. No thanks. I turned south and headed down the coast.

I generally had no problem with the Council members as people. After all, my parents were among the regular members. But when they all got together in the same room, otherwise interesting people suddenly became pompous assholes and a room that seemed bright and well-decorated turned stuffy.

However, even trying to actively avoid trouble from the rulers of towns, they always seem to want to bother you. You build a house near an active volcano. If taxation auditors can make it safely to your house, they will charge you property tax, hoping to take your money or you house, despite never laying a single brick. Thankfully, income and property taxes were no longer things. But ships from the Council followed us like guards from the *Daggerfall* game immediately after you have been caught in a crime. We hadn't even done anything yet!

Anyway, they stopped us, and demanded know where we were going. When we told them we were going to the Garden of Eden, the people on deck looked shocked. "They know too much!" one of them said. Uh oh.

The guards pulled out their longbows and started firing arrows at us. "*Zeno's Arrow!*" Tamashii called out, focusing her powers against the area. This wasn't one of her natural powers, mainly limited to bending

spoons and other feats of telekinesis, flame based abilities, and healing. She had needed to work pretty hard from infancy to age nine to get her powers under control. Before that, she was a brilliant child who unfortunately caused everything around her to warp or shatter by random stray emotions. One day, she had been very bratty, and we tried to spank her, and we had to rebuild the house because she had managed to shatter it. She started crying even more than when spanked her, realizing the hardship she had put us through. She was a good child, but unlike most kids, I imagine her worst period was her early childhood, not her teenage years, solely because she was an absolute freak when she was just being born, and getting her to the point where she was normal took major training. But after training to control her powers (mostly, she still had issues having nightmares or when she was drunk, later on), she had to train even more to develop them. Contrary to the *Dungeons & Dragons* version of a psionic, a Soulfire isn't overpowered at all, once they control their powers. It's a matter of retraining them to use more power once they have control.

Anyway, Zeno's Arrow was something she had to study, because it involved making use of theory in order to enhance her psionic powers. Soulfire powers appear to work because of something called Territory. That is, within a certain range, personal reality is entirely subject to them, but they have no power at all outside that range. This meant that if she imagined a swamp within her territory, without really casting a spell, the terrain would become more muddy. Tamashii knew she couldn't attack them as their boats were too far away, while their arrows could probably hit her from 100 yards away. And so, she used a defensive ability to minimize this disadvantage in her favor. Zeno's paradoxes were a series of theories that that gave reasons why motion was impossible. One of them said that at a fixed speed moving towards an object, it would continue to move and the object would never reach it. Another said that it if you divided time into instants, at no point would it be moving because it was frozen, so movement was impossible. The last one divided the distance between the starting point into half, then a quarter, then an eighth, and so on, until all distance was divided so no motion could occur. The arrows stopped

mid-flight, and I knocked them back, yelling "*Jump Thrust*!" as I swung my sword. A cutting gust of wind somehow ignored these paradoxes, and cut the arrows apart as it forced them back.

Portia used her magic of creation to manifest some large totem poles in the water to restrict their boats, which was good, because now there were a bunch of mages moving onto the deck. As powerful as her abilities were, she would be at a disadvantage against conventional casters without her range limitations. She might be able to make a force field against spells, but we'd have to move closer fight back. As we were leaving, Sastra and Lucy tried to use their powers. Lucy's Oracle powers were too overspecialized, and Sastra's abilities were better suited for short range. About all Sastra could do was lob balls of darkness or fire (which they could counter), or breathe Hellfire at them (which they couldn't, due to Hellfire's tendency to burn runes). But Sastra's Hellfire also had a range issue, so we only managed to burn up the closest ship. Dealing with government types was a nuisance. Our only hope was that they didn't follow us.

I imagine I knew why they wanted to keep Eden protected. An incredibly vibrant forest should be an endless supply of food. If all food suddenly became cheap, it might disrupt the local economy. No worries there, we only were likely to collect enough to replenish our ship's supplies, and we wouldn't tell anyone about the island. After an hour or two, we looked back. They didn't appear to be interested in following us after all. But you could never tell.

RENA

I couldn't believe I was doing this. I was seriously considering betraying Jesus. And worse, for a few cheap tokens from the priests, to sell him out to the Atlantean royal guard. The Atlanteans weren't particularly kind to the hybrids, as to us, it didn't matter that we were humans or not, we couldn't breathe underwater and didn't have psionic abilities. They saw us all as inferiors. As a citizen of Israel, this seriously annoyed me, and I couldn't believe I was colluding with them. But it wasn't his soft treatment of them that caused my defection, either.

It all started weeks before, though. I had been so sure that I knew

what Jesus was all about. While most people thought the Messiah was here to fight Ancient Israel's enemies, I knew better, I said.

As I say, I was a Hebrew and a hybrid. I was devoted to the religion of Judaism, and I was devoted to Jesus. I thought that Jesus was simply another rabbi, who was here to reform Judaism. I thought he was the Messiah, yes, but I wasn't as sure anymore what that meant. I had been convinced that Jesus was here to bring justice to the hybrids, and have the Jews treat them as equals.

But now Jesus was arguing with the temple authorities! Even if Atlantis was not the enemy, this was no way to secure our equality. Jesus even called them whitewashed tombs, and warned us to listen to their words, but not follow their actions, because they liked to be greeted in the marketplace and hold places of honor, while the poor and widowed are suffering under their laws. That made sense, though, I guess. It was just troubling to see him fighting the priesthood.

But the thing that made me really me question Jesus was when we were in a marketplace, and he smashed the place up and freed all the animals. What was Jesus thinking?!?

JESUS

I suppose I should explain. The early followers of God were the Hebrews, but lately the stiff-necked people who ran the priesthood, I had taken to calling Jews. That is, these people weren't the same as the Hebrew that God called, but a race of people who had devised for themselves man-made laws. These laws were the rabbinic teachings of Talmud rather than the written Torah. They were laws that the Pharisees (basically the lawyers) enforced on everyone, despite the fact that most people had no time to study the law.

While Israel was occupied, regular people were in survival mode. Their concern was not being sure to note that they had avoided carrying more than 15 lb of grain on the Sabbath, it was making sure their taxes were paid, and that they children didn't starve to death. So to add to their oppression by foreign troops, they had a set of man-made religious laws condemning them as a sinner, and trying to burden them with added monetary commitments.

Let me explain this using an example. Let's take two people, one of

them an Atlantean citizen and one of them a Hebrew citizen. I'll call the Atlantean citizen Triton, and the Hebrew citizen Ariel. Triton is an Atlantean tax collector. Being a member of the ruling Atlantean state, their income taxes are collected at the time of income. They are given an income sheet, the bank treats it as a check to be cashed to two different people, the state and the person. And no, there isn't such a thing as a counterfeit income sheet. The Atlanteans knew what they were doing. There was no tax day, or paperwork designed to torture Atlanteans who failed math. Money was taken directly as a cut, and without hassle. The people of Atlantis did not have other taxes aside from a simple and direct income tax, and maybe the occasional sales tax.

Ariel, on the other hand, suffers greatly under Triton. She has to pay for imports, exports, bridge tolls, road money, town dues, and many other taxes. And to make matters worse, there was zero oversight. Another tax collector Arpelio might accost Ariel on the way to Triton's booth, he could collect her taxes on the spot, but none of it would be reported to Atlantis, so he would tax her again. If she of course couldn't pay both of their taxes, either one would say she had tax debt. Needless to say Ariel was working very hard to avoid drowning in debt, and thus having to work full time, including during the Sabbath. All of this made her a sinner, which means she needed to bring an animal for a sacrifice of atonement. This might involve a lengthy trip to the temple, where the animal might get injured or die. If it died, she would need to buy a new one. And since the animal needed to be without blemish, even an injury would disqualify it as a sacrifice. Further, the temple officials could simply call it blemished, and demand another sacrifice be paid for. And of course, they couldn't use secular money in the temple, so this meant their secular money was collected in order to be changed and then collected again as sacred money. I saw the abject poverty of these people, I saw how they were labeled sinners, while the rich were call righteous, and I saw how some classes of people such as lepers, menstruating women, and hybrids couldn't even enter so their sins couldn't be forgiven. Well, if it were up to men, not God. But since it was up to God, I

made sure to show them that God was pissed. I flipped tables before it was cool, I made a whip and used it to drive out the money changers, and I set free all of the animals.

It should have made a difference that I cared even for the little animals, but I could tell by the look in Rena's eyes that she didn't understand, and that I had let her down. To her understanding, I imagine my mission looked like what later people would unironically call social justice. She saw the people I chose as my disciples as filling out some sort of quota, and that I would would make everything right. To give equality for all sounded to her like something I'd do.

Rena was too sweet to think in terms of revenge, and she had once been human herself. But it was all too tempting to see me as bringing equal rights to demons, merfolk, angels and hybrids in regard to humans. But my kingdom was never about this world. My goal was to build a temple of God's kingdom atop the physical reality. Of course, the powers that be misunderstood and felt threatened by the idea that they wouldn't be in charge of things. And so, they did everything from change the shape of the Earth (it was obviously a flat Earth with a domed atmosphere, with light projected from outside the Earth at the sun and moon, which were objects inside the atmosphere), to corrupting my teachings, to setting up evil governments to keep the Earth in a state of war. But all of this happened after the first time I came, when Rome ran the world rather than Atlantis. When I came this time, everyone was blindsided. And for a time, I did bring about perfect peace as the Messiah ought to. But let's talk about that later. The point is, Rena didn't understand what my purpose on Earth was, and because of that she betrayed me. I don't blame her, though. God's plan was hard to follow, as it needed human help in order to be realized on Earth. Otherwise, the only changes are in Heaven.

RENA

That very day, I made my way to Zerubbabel's Temple. Later accounts will tell you it was Herod's Temple, but well, history is muddled up thanks to the Babylonian occupation. The Jews forgot that they used to be Hebrews, and have countless centuries erased

from their personal history thanks to living in the lands of their enemies. Their history has Zerubbabel's Temple built in 520 BC and the exile being before that. But all of these was distorted record from their conquerors. Actually, Zerubbabel's Temple was a much more ancient second Temple, and Herod's temple was literally built millennia later.

So anyway, I went here to talk to the Pharisees. "I've had enough," I said to them, "I have no idea what Jesus is planning anymore. He isn't working for equality for people like me. He isn't working for Israel either. For all I know, he might even be working for our enemies. If you're here to arrest Jesus, I'll help you." They smiled, the sort of slimy smile that you'd see on a toad, "We also don't know what Jesus is planning, and what we know, we don't like. Meet with us later to discuss plans to betray him, and we will give you thirty coins of silver. This is the price you deserve." It wasn't about the money. But the money was worth roughly $600 in spending power in today's terms (standards of living were much lower back then), or $194 in metal value. To them, however, it was not a decent payment, but an attempt to further humiliate me. This is the most that I expected to see in my lifetime, but I knew each one had thousands of shekels.

But the joke's on them. That money eventually became priceless, and the land that was bought from my apparent demise (Akeldama) continued to help provide a place of burial for foreigners for centuries to come. Moreover, as I later restudied these writings hoping to make sense of them, I learned that 30 shekels was the redemption (dowry) price of a bride.

Some part of me thought that I might still be able to help Jesus. Like, if someone tried to arrest him, he would respond with force, fighting off all the people who were creating injustice, and showing everyone that he was the real Messiah. But in order to do this, Jesus had to have a lot of people in one place to witness his kingship. Earlier this week, he had already entered the Eastern Gate (also known as the Golden or Beautiful Gate), the gate that the Lord's anointed was supposed to come through. After that, it would be sealed, except as God wished it. It would take only a little push, and

Jesus would prove he was Messiah. Yes, it seemed now like I was betraying Jesus. But I was helping him.

Chapter 19

In which humanity at last returns to the Garden of Eden to do some weeding

LUCY

I was in the crow's nest, looking at the horizon, when I saw a thick mist ahead. Then I noticed that it seemed to surrounding a specific area and not moving from it. I noticed this, despite strong winds blowing the ship back, the fog hung over the area. But I knew from visiting the Divine Border that by boat, we often would have to use my Oracle powers to shift the wind away from an area that God didn't want regular people visiting. That there was mist surrounding a particular area meant, "Guys, I think we found it! The land of Eden is over there..." We suddenly hit a sandbar, and the ship stopped. Sastra jumped out of the boat, and leaned down and picked it up to check the keel for damage, "It seems fine. There weren't and rocks scraping the underside of the ship." Unfortunately, as I say, I was in the crow's nest while she did that so my words were, "Wait, don't-" At about that point, I was falling headfirst toward the deck. Nevras rushed forward, and scooped me out of the air in a gentle bridal carry. "Hey there!" he said. I blushed intensely, "Hey..." I jumped to my feet, trying not to acknowledge certain things, "Dammit, Sastra! Don't just pick up entire ships without warning. You could have killed me!" Sastra hauled the ship in the sandbar all the way to where ship was, and now we could clearly see that the mist surrounded an island. She dropped the ship onto the sand, and I lurched forward, but Nevras caught me again. "…" I said as I blushed, followed by, "Oh c'mon, Sastra, you meant to do that one!" Nevras said, "Is it bad if you do fall into my arms, Lucy?" I, who was normally the more talkative, the more honest about my feelings, was suddenly rendered bashful by this man. I asked, "Aren't you a married man though, Nevras?" He backed off then. I jumped from the ship. Sastra caught me, teasing, "Darling, come into my arms!" Sastra and Portia were the same age as Tamashii, but their bloodlines made them look in their teens. I poked her, "Cut that out!"

We walked from the sandbar to the shore. From within the fog, a thick forest crept through as though from nothing. The fog was unlike the mists of the Void, but fully as thick. But it wasn't like the fog of the rest of the New Earth. It wasn't gray, but a clear color that created a vibrant light within the island. Here was the remains of the original firmament. As Elias explained when we got back, as long as we were within this layer of clear water, the radiation from the atmosphere was dispersed, and people within were actually able to live as long as the generations of Noah and Adam. Even if I wasn't eating healthy, six hundred years was not a stretch, and if I was taking good care of myself, it wasn't unthinkable for me to live to nine hundred or more. And the firmament also kept the forest vibrant without an excess of water. Even maple trees were roughly the size of redwoods, and all of them had live vines on them. The area was brimming with plant and animal life.

Unfortunately for us, it also had creatures that meant us harm. Rabid bats, wild dogs, sabertooth tigers, and possessed cows, all of these we fought while heading towards the center of the Garden of Eden. Nevras fought with his sword, I with my martial arts, Tamashii using pebbles, Sastra with her claws, and Portia... well, she just used her wings to fly and keep everything at bay. We held back from any technique use, because we wanted to avoid damaging the environment. For each creature I punched or killed I said, "I am so sorry!" And I meant it. Unlike Ambrosia, who was apparently made of stone, I actually feel sadness whenever I ended a life or caused pain to living things.

At the other end of the spectrum, Sastra was burying the diseased, skinning these creatures, chopping them up into meat chunks, and dumping them into the Preserver until at last it was full. I was horrified, but we did actually need more food. We still had pickled vegetables and some salted fish, but they were greatly reduced from before. It had been a long trip, complicated by the fact that the wind and waves had always seemed to push us away from our destination.

By the time they got back, more animals had showed up. Why were they after us? It's not like we ever did anything to them!

JESUS

Knowledge of Good & Evil is a funny thing. It distorts our perceptions so we see things in absolutes. Lucy and the others saw evil cows, evil bats, evil tigers, and so on. She didn't know how to not hurt these animals, but she did feel sympathy. A truly kind person might see friendly tigers, friendly bats, and if there had been a man-eating deathbeast with nothing but canines, they would in turn see a friendly man-eating deathbeast with nothing but canines. It is all in perception. The Sage known as Lao Tzu said, "I have heard that those who celebrate life walk safely among the wild animals. When they go into battle, they remain unharmed. The animals find no place to attack them and the weapons are unable to harm them. Why? Because they can find no place for death in them." That's a different translation than I'm used to, but anyway. When a person has no perception that harm may come to them, nothing that even the most evil people can do will be able to bother them.

Now usually, this is because they are so decent and likable that they manage to befriend anyone who harmed them. I nonetheless managed to piss off the Pharisees in my own life, but that was intentional. But this is what I taught others to do with turning the other cheek. It was about cultivating a mindset of even taming those who thought to do harm by giving everyone what they wanted and needed. But there was another way to enter this forest without harm. It was to be like Ambrosia, a person without perception of good and evil any longer. Had Lilith come at her with a sword, nothing she tried would be able to hurt her. Ambrosia would see a tiger as simply a tiger, not one wishing to bite her face. And a sword, even one as sharp as hers, wouldn't even be able to dent her in this state. Nor would Lilith's pet rock Christina. Nor any weapon of the mortal world.

But perfect neutrality is a double-edged sword. While no outside force could harm her, apathy and depression were very real things, and often people would slip from catatonia into a straight-up coma. To describe living in this way, consider a place of curry so hot that people in India would be surprised, a place that would actually hurt your throat to eat; as she was now, Ambrosia couldn't even taste it. So

far, Sapphire and I had kept her healthy, but I could see it starting to happen. Their journey had taken longer than it should have because winds had been unseasonable. If Tamashii and the others didn't make it back by the end of the month, Ambrosia would be dead. I can raise a great many people, but a person happy with death is something else entirely. Resurrection involves permission, and Ambrosia without Knowledge of Good & Evil, probably wouldn't be able to make that choice. These were dire times!

LUCY

These were dire times. Nevras and I were running away from the varmints, when the two of us tripped and fell into a small cavern. I was sure that they would come after us, and that there would be nowhere to run, but I heard them turn their attention to the others.

A long awkward moment passed. "So..." I started. Nevras and I said at the same time, "About earlier..." Then we both giggled. I said, "You go first." Nevras started, "Look I know we both like each other, so this is super awkward," he continued, as I was sure he was about to confess his feelings but dreaded all the more that he was going to reject me, "but I am married, and this can't proceed. Tamashii loves you dearly, and has wanted you around, so I'm not about to push you away. But I think you and I are better as good friends. This can't turn intimate." The look of hope on my face collapsed, replaced with hurt and anger, "But... I'm a part of Ambrosia too! I'm just the part of her that has stronger feelings. The part that she she made because she has impulses she can't cope with. When you're rejecting me, you're rejecting your wife!" Nevras sighed, "Yes, I love you move than you can ever know. I was in fact thinking about being in spending time with you earlier on our boat ride. But I don't want to cheat on my wife, not even with my other wife!"

Most people would be confused, but I perfectly got it. Nevras was a decent man and I respect that a lot. But I had needs, "Why don't we stay up the night talking, and I'll convince... Wait, you're heading to bed already?" Nevras mumbled, "I'd love to do that. But we had a long trip today, and we've been fighting creatures from the moment we arrived until just recently. The others have probably set up a tent

now. Or they're dead. I'm sleepy..." I kept trying to rouse him, but he only managed a few minuted each time before heading back to bed. I emerged from the cave just long enough to verify that yes, the group wasn't dead, Portia had built them a tent of some metal that I couldn't recognize. But not long enough that the animals might notice me and give chase. I settled in and wrapped myself around him. In his sleep, he adjusted his bit just enough to let me cuddle with him. That would have to be enough.

JESUS

Knowledge is a funny thing. Knowledge keeps you up at night. Knowledge that Lucy loved him and that he loved her back but couldn't act on it was what caused that situation. And knowledge that Rena, who I had called Judas, would betray me had caused my current grief.

I knew that nobody could harm me unless I allowed it. But I *intended* to allow it. And so, during a Passover meal, we were dipping bread in the same container and I told her that she would betray me, and to go ahead with it. That very night, she went to collect coins and to bring soldiers, and she was going to kiss me to identify who I was to the guard. But this wasn't some ironic kiss, this was a kiss of a person who truly did love me, and hoped I would show that I could save myself. But I was praying to God right now that he do what he wanted not whatever I might want. As much as I personally didn't want to die on a cross like some hoodlum, I was gonna go through with that.

I stood up from my prayers, and realized the others had fallen asleep from too much food, drink, and partying. After all, Passover was a festival, despite its solemnity. I woke them and went to keep on praying, but each time, they couldn't even stay up an hour. Finally, I told them to wake up because my hour was at hand. Even if you're sleepy, a group of armed soldiers is better than coffee.

And then, Rena gave me the deepest and most passionate kiss she had ever given anybody. I could feel the tears dripping from her eyes. "I'm sorry..." she said, "If I knew of some other way..." Religious record records me saying, "Judas, must you betray me with a kiss?!?"

But what I actually said was, "I know."

Chapter 20

In which the author deliberately inserts a tearjerker movie scene

TAMASHII

Atreyu dismounted from his horse Artax, after the narrator had finished talking about the Swamps of Sadness. "C'mon boy," Atreyu said. After some hesitation, he managed to pull Artax a bit. He struggled along pulling him, while Artax lifted a foot at a time, like someone managing to put their clothes on one arm or leg at a time, to do the dishes when life was awful. Artax stopped a bit, and Atreyu had to pull him over the hump. "That's a boy," Atreyu said, as he led Artax past a tree.

I ate popcorn while watching the scene on the Crystal Mirror. While Bastian Bux was reading this all in a book. I was watching a movie about a book about another world. I was sure this would never happen to me, so I just kept munching away. It was my first time watching this, but though the crystal inserted into the mirror was of a film made actual millennia ago, the clarity held up perfectly. I ate another kernel of popcorn while my friend Sastra said that this was the best part. Portia told me not to listen to her, and that this was actually the worst and most horrible part. Having never seen it before, I didn't know. I ate some more popcorn then washed it down with a drink just as Atreyu said, "S'okay," and they switched to narration. Bastian Bux read, "Everyone knew that whoever let the sadness overtake him would sink into the swamp..." Am I going to like this scene?

"You're doing fine, Artax," Atreyu coaxed. He pulled Artax on through the muck with a nearby grass thicket, telling him, "That's right." Then suddenly he pulled, and the horse wouldn't go. The film zoomed to Atreyu turning around, while Artax stood in place and refused his pull. Atreyu said, "C'mon, Artax," but this time it was as though the horse could speak, although faintly. "No, I can't," he seemed to say. Atreyu pulled harder but then lowered the bridle, "What's the matter? What's wrong?" He pulled again. Again, Artax's emotions seemed to speak for him, and I distinctly heard, "No. Leave me alone. Stop please." Atreyu insisted, "C'mon boy! What the

matter?" Artax's face said it all as he looked around, "All this darkness and gloom is getting to me." Atreyu smiled, "I understand." He walked into a deeper area, an area that had not only muck but actual water, before stepping on to muck on the other side. Had Atreyu had any sadness, that watery place would have been too deep for him. But he was fine even in deeper waters, as he said, "It's too difficult for you." It was then that he noticed Artax sinking. "Artax!" he shouted this time, "You're sinking! C'mon! Turn around! You have to, now!" But Artax had the look (for a horse), of a person contemplating suicide. Atreyu pulled pivoted his body while holding the saddle, running half around Artax in an attempt to get him to move somewhere, anywhere, if it meant moving out from the sadness. The film gave us a money shot of Atreyu's concern as he shouted, "C'mon! Artax!!!" Then they switched perspective to Atreyu from the back, pulling Artax, "Fight against the sadness, Artax..." He pleaded, moving close to Artax who was now in muck up to his neck, "Artax, please? You're letting the sadness of the swamps get to you... You have to try... You have to care... For me. You're my friend. I love you." But Artax was too caught in his sadness. Atreyu tried to pull him out of it, angrily shouting at him, "Artax!!! Stupid horse! You gotta move or you'll die!" He begged, "Move, please..." And then he told the horse, "I won't give up. Don't quit. Artax!!!" The scene cut to black. They zoomed into Atreyu crying. Then Bastian was crying. But I wasn't crying at all, not a bit. But then I noticed my popcorn was was salty and wet. Okay, maybe a bit. But don't tell anyone, you got that?

I dunno why I thought about this memory. It's not like anything like that would happen to me. Though strictly speaking, there had been that one time that Azrael had to visit Niraya, and cut a big gash in the place getting me out. But that was a fluke, it wasn't like I was prone to things like that.

That day, Portia and I agreed that Sastra's taste in movie scenes, and possibly her taste in movies could not be trusted. Sure enough, not long after she treated us both to *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas*. We

both called her a demon for liking this, but she defended its evocative feel and artistic quality.

And here we were face to face with a real life Swamp of Sadness. Only, Lucy said, "We should call this the Dark Swamp of Darkness." She had clearly not paid attention when this movie played. Before, we had thought that the secret the Council was keeping was the wonderful plenty within Eden. And indeed, we filled the boat with baskets of fresh fruits and vegetables, along with plenty of meat. But now, we understood what had happened. But Lucy told it anyway for the benefit of you readers, "All this time... To keep such a secret. They've been poisoning the Garden! It's probably to try to kill either the Tree of Life, because they thought that such eternal life represented a threat to a stable population. Or maybe they thought eating from the Tree of Knowledge might make people relearn war or big government." As Lucy explained it, the Council didn't seem so bad, just overzealous. She continued offering very detailed theories, which sounded right. Lucy was a barrel of exposition right now, knowing motivations that she could not possibly have known, short of reading them from a script.

Speaking of barrels. There were barrels of arsenic trioxide, hydrogen cyanide, nitrous oxide, phosgene, PFOA, and many other chemicals that were either dangerous to the human body or to the environment. They had thankfully combined in a way that was not poisonous, acidic, or carcinogenic. You'll notice that I didn't say harmless. In actual fact, all of the plants around the Tree of Life and the Tree of Knowledge of Good & Evil were totally dead, and the moisture combined with the toxins to form a miasma in the air, and a morass on the ground. Yes, we have one of those "word of the day" calendars.

I sighed, thinking about the pointlessness of this quest. Ambrosia got herself off the streets, then did her duty again only to get into this catatonic state. I wasn't sure that what I did would make any difference. She was just gonna die anyway, and in fact so would I, one day. Why did any of this quest matter? Why, they entire thing was depressing... "Tamashii! you're sinking! C'mon, turn around! You

have to now." said Portia. "Fight against the sadness!" Sastra chimed in. And Portia said, "You have to try... You have to care... For me. You're my friend. I love you." Okay that one I believed. But I wasn't really sad, I was just feeling gloomy about our outlook, that's all. All the same, it was depressing to have people worry about you. I didn't want to feel like a burden to them. I was continuing to sink, when I realized that without intending to, my guilt about making others worry had in turn made me sad. That as much as I might deny it, there were parts of me that were rather dark, just like my mother. "Hey kiddo," I heard a voice say. I looked up to see Nevras. Realizing that I was now in the Swamp up to my neck, where everyone else was was only walking in muck that reached their ankles, made me feel even more guilty and miserable. I was sad about being sad.

"That's enough of that," he said, "no child of mine will wallow in self-pity. Not when there are things to do." And indeed, some future self of mine was a writer. She'd finished the book that I read over and over again about the care of my favorite pet. We'd left the little bugger on the ship, as we weren't sure what to expect here. And I wanted to go exploring. But mostly, just hanging out with my friends might be enough. I didn't have to have such all-or-nothing unrealistic expectations for life, it was okay to just be. Grabbing me and hoisting me up in air before setting me down on a rocky area, he asked, "How would you like to get a piggyback ride across this swamp?" I shook my head, "Nahhhh dad, you're too uncool! I like my other Mommy better." That cut him down to size, "My daughter doesn't think I'm worth anything..." Lucy bent down, and gave him a kiss, "You're worth it to me." I am told these are the same words that Ambrosia uttered to Dad when he was struggling in an illusion the very night I was conceived. Lucy and I helped pull Dad out of the sludge, and they walked together holding hands and with me on her back, the very image of a happy family. We walked along until at least both Trees were in sight.

Still, a prevailing miasma of hopelessness prevailed. The swamp itself caused sinking but the miasma created a choking feeling. I know it was hard getting there, but... I wondered. Would we be able to make

it back as easily as we came?

JESUS

Awhile back, my disciples looked at the temple and how it was filled with statues and polished stones, and so on. They mentioned how lovely it was. Disgusted with their worship of a piece of stone, I blurted out that not one stone of the original building would remain. They often point to the Wailing Wall as proof that I gave a false prophecy, but I never said that the walls might not remain. The outer walls surrounding a building are not the same as the building itself. It is entirely possible for a meteor to hit a build yet leave its walls.

But I was referring to the Temple that is my body, not some bit of stone. They didn't get it, so they asked what sort of sign there would be to such an event. So I gave them the signs surrounding my death, signs of heaven and earth, such as perhaps a darkness over the land that lasted several hours?

I had been arrested and although my people tried to fight for my freedom, I refused their help. They cut someone's ear off, but after telling them to stop, I touched the guard's ear and immediately time selectively reversed, leaving him with a whole ear.

They took me before a trial, and people testified against me while I said nothing. It didn't matter, as the accusers couldn't keep their story against me straight. So the judge asked me if I had anything to say, whether the accusation against me was true or not. I explained to him that the sort of kingdom I was making was not a political one. So he sent me to a Jewish official. After I didn't do any miracles, he agreed with the judge that I wasn't a real threat. He intended that I be whipped and set free, but the crowds demanded that I be executed. I had betrayed their faith in the Messiah. They even called for some other Jesus to be set free in my place. I was the scapegoat, after all. The Passover animal.

I was whipped, I had my clothes torn, but back then the Atlanteans didn't do crucifixion. Their practice was to throw people into the air, and impale them on a tree with their tridents. With people they particularly hated, the made a game of it, seeing how long the trident stayed pinned, and seeing how long a person could hang before dying.

This fulfilled two passages, one about how "Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree," as I in effect bore a curse for the sins of others. The other was about how "they have pierced my hands and feet." You see, the Atlanteans could easily go through my torso, but it was more of a challenge to pin my hands while I was in midair. The symbol of me that my followers wore looked like a tree. But the symbol that later Atlantean followers chose looked more like the trident from *Dragon Quest*.

You know the rest. How Peter denied me three times before the rooster crowed. How Judas (apparently) died. Actually, she faked her death, and used the abilities I had given her to take a different form. How a field was bought with blood money. How the curtain of the temple tore apart that day. And how after this, all my disciples hid in the upper room.

Chapter 21

In which forbidden fruit is taken, and no that's not a sexual metaphor

TAMASHII

We made it to the center of the Garden of Eden, only to find out that the Tree of Knowledge of Good & Evil was this time heavily guarded. It occurred to me how much the original event had been a setup. I mean seriously, in the center of the Garden, low-hanging fruit, no powerful creature protecting it, not involving moving through a deadly swamp with equally deadly gas, Adam has a wife that convinces him to take it, and a snake that actively convinces his wife to try it. I smell a setup.

The guardian this time was Cerberus, not to be confused with Cerebus the Aardvark. They had an honest-to-goodness demon death dog with three heads guarding the place? Where's a streetwise Hercules when you need him? Portia waved goodbye to me. "Wait, you're leaving me to fight this alone? I thought you cared about me!" I protested. She shook her head, "I trust you to manage. You've got Sastra who is a literal demonic teenager to help to out. And more importantly, you've got your family! Besides, I'm not running away." Oh, really? Because it seems an awful lot like you're running from this big beastie over here.

Noting the look on my face, she pointed to the Tree of Life, "Honest. I'm gonna fly over there, pick the Fruit, and plant it in the Swamp. You'll see!" It dawned on me that someone had to do this. The Fruit of the Tree of Life could restore even the most dead areas back to life, but unlike an apple tree, it would never become overripe, the point at which most fruits fell. In terms of how they looked, the Fruit of Knowledge of Good & Evil was a dragonfruit, while the Fruit of Life looked like a golden apple. She indeed flew off, but I had to assume she either faced her own challenge, or she got greedy and took one for herself, as it was longer than expected before the Swamp was drained and the land turned green again. But anyway, we were too busy fighting our own battles.

Cerberus pounced and clawed with his forepaws trying to scratch at us, or pin us so that he could bite our heads off with one of his heads. But the battle against us was over very quickly. And no, it wasn't because any of us were overwhelmingly strong. It was like Portia said. I had family. I had been trained by Mom to face centaurs before I even started on the mission against Estheriel, and I had been trained extensively as a kid to control my power. But there was also the matter of teamwork between the lot of us. Mom weakened it with Alexander's powers of light, Sastra and I gave one of the heads explosive gas (so to speak) by firing my Soulfire and her Hellfire down its throat. And Dad ran around it, using a Pierce attack in several spots, until the two remaining heads coughed up blood. Portia came flying back, and suddenly noticed the Swamp was gone. "Took you long enough," I said to her. But Portia looked like she was about to cry, "It was so frightening! A giant worm was guarding the Tree!" Lucy, who had all of Ambrosia's experiences up to Estheriel, gave her an enormous hug, "Oh sweetie, I'm sorry you had to go through that! That's terrible."

Uh, anyway, we picked the Fruit of Knowledge, and carried it from the Garden. Unlike before, the animals left us alone. I wasn't sure if the Fruit was ironically forcing them back, or whether they respected our power after beating Cerberus, but we made it back to the ship without incident, setting the fruit aside so it wouldn't become lost or

mixed with the other produce. Our only job now was making it back safely. I suppose we didn't have to rush too much.

SAPPHIRE

Ambrosia's apathy had made her worse. She no longer ate or drank anything, and it was unethical to force anyone to eat against their will. I did anyway, though just the minimum to keep her from dying. Mostly though, Jesus and I just healed her, as much as her weakened body could stand. She was 5'4" and weighed 108 lb with a cup size of B when we first had split. I was the same size now as then, but her breasts had shrunk to a very flat A (or even AA) cup size, and she had gone from about average body weight to fairly underweight at 92 lb. She wasn't skeleton thin just yet (16 BMI, not yet around 12), but a couple more weeks of this, and she might be an actual skeleton.

It wasn't that she was depressed, so much as completely disinterested in just about everything. I mean, a depressed person is legitimately sad about something, whereas it was a matter of Ambrosia not really wanting or needing anything.

JESUS

Darkness was all around me. Before salvation came to the world, the Afterlife was very simple. A shadowy place known as Sheol. It wasn't nonexistence, but an existence similar to being buried. At the time of Rome, this involved a tomb or cave. But in Pangaea, it largely depended on the location. Atlantis, for instance tossed the dead into the sea, where they would be eaten by fish. But thankfully, I didn't have an Afterlife that resembled that.

Now normally, a person within their Afterlife is completely self-absorbed. They can only see their own pain. That is, had I been a normal person, I would not only see darkness, but had another person been even one foot away from me, it would not have mattered because I would not see or hear other people. And I would replay everything about my life, good and bad, until I resolved things, and was reborn. And some people never did, they were stuck in their own torment unable to disengage. The Afterlife has been reformed more recently, so it's not at all like that any more. I was the last to experience this. The very last, in fact.

While other people were trapped in self-pity or self-congratulation, I loved myself as I did others, and my field of vision immediately widened to include everyone around me. Suddenly, where before there was nothing but darkness, I saw a vibrant world of mountains, waterfalls, and lush plants of colors never seen on any vegetation on Earth. In fact, it could best be compared to the original Garden of Eden, the spiritual land that Adam and Eve once walked. The one Lucy, Nevras, and Tamashii were near was a cheap 20 mile segment, whereas this stretched out for the size of a small continent. There were dark swamps, and brilliant portions, but it had a sort of untamed beauty that was unique to life after one died. Yet none of them could see it because they were trapped in delusion. It was time to wake them. And so, I prophesied to these dry bones, that they might live and be people again. One by one, they roused from their daydreams and nightmares, and saw this world for what it was. I encouraged those on the outskirts to continue waking people up, and within three days there were an awful lot of awakened (not to be confused with woke) people. I had started a movement, and I knew that these disciples would start a reform in the same way that the twelve in the living world were building my kingdom on Earth.

And now it was time for me to go. "*I have come not to bring peace, but a sword,*" I declared, and true to the rules of reality in the Afterlife, one appeared. Not knowing what to make of this, everyone who was aware gave me some space. Using the sword, I sliced straight up, then across, then down, then back across. The air in front of me fell away, replaced by a blue screen of doom of sorts. The Afterlife threw a bunch of computer code and binary at me as it tried to adjust for this hole ripped in its space. I then prophesied to the Opening, saying, "*I bid you you stay open.*" The code sorted itself out, but now it definitely wasn't having any of this. «Unexpected command. Please enter admin password for any new commands.» I knew the admin password. I said, "This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.." I dipped the sword in the open wounds left by my hanging on the tree. Then I sliced the sword down and across, making a gash in the opening. It made a rebooting

sound, and the hole showed, «Password accepted.» The opening closed, and in its place there was a very large gate with everyone in the Afterlife able to see it. My sword shrunk down and became a key, a key that I turned and the door opened. I left the key in the door exited, and hundreds of dead followed behind.

On the other side of the door, I arose in a perfect body, though none saw me yet. What they did see was an earthquake, followed by the dead rising bodily from their graves. This included all of the hybrids who had died before, who now had bodies from of the genetic diseases that killed them, and many had supernatural powers of their own. Even though I had been in the Afterlife for three days, the dead rose instantly after my death, because time didn't work the same way there.

It wasn't until three days passed in the physical world that a new spiritual body was prepared for me to re-enter the world. A body that had no set physical attributes, and could bypass the limits of the world at will. I first appeared to Mary of Magdala, the one also known as Rena (and formerly as Judas), who was visiting the tomb when she noticed the grave was rolled away.

She thought I was a gardener because of my new form, until I said her name, the same way I first called her, "Mary. Mary of Magdala. You are called Rena. And I called you Judas, but no longer." She stared, "It's you! Jesus, what are you doing here?" She rushed to embrace me, but I told her my body was still not really complete yet. So I told her to tell the others. She did, and at first they didn't believe her, but some of them checked the tomb, and saw the cloth that had bound my body lain in a pile, and the stone rolled away. Others saw me when I appeared to them in an upper room later. This time my body was solid, yet able to phase through walls as I wished. Thomas wasn't there though, so he thought everyone was making this up, and insisted that unless he saw the wounds, he wouldn't believe. I appeared later, again appearing through the building, and asked him to touch my wounds and believe. I also ate some food, just to show that I wasn't a ghost and was fully alive.

Chapter 22

In which a once in a lifetime opportunity presents itself

TAMASHII

I was listening to a music video a few years ago, never realizing that I'd be part of such adventures as this. At the time, I'd been at home goofing off, reading books and listening to music. Right now, as we had just explored an island that most people didn't know existed, a song came to mind.

And you may find yourself living in a shotgun shack
And you may find yourself in another part of the world
And you may find yourself behind the wheel of a large automobile
And you may find yourself in a beautiful house, with a beautiful wife
And you may ask yourself, "Well, how did I get here?"

Letting the days go by, let the water hold me down
Letting the days go by, water flowing underground
Into the blue again after the money's gone
Once in a lifetime, water flowing underground

And you may ask yourself, "How do I work this?"
And you may ask yourself, "Where is that large automobile?"
And you may tell yourself, "This is not my beautiful house"
And you may tell yourself, "This is not my beautiful wife"

Letting the days go by, let the water hold me down
Letting the days go by, water flowing underground
Into the blue again after the money's gone
Once in a lifetime, water flowing underground

Same as it ever was, same as it ever was
Same as it ever was, same as it ever was
Same as it ever was, same as it ever was
Same as it ever was, same as it ever was

Water dissolving and water removing
There is water at the bottom of the ocean
Under the water, carry the water
Remove the water at the bottom of the ocean
Water dissolving and water removing

Letting the days go by, let the water hold me down
Letting the days go by, water flowing underground
Into the blue again, into the silent water
Under the rocks and stones, there is water underground
Letting the days go by, let the water hold me down
Letting the days go by, water flowing underground
Into the blue again after the money's gone
Once in a lifetime, water flowing underground

You may ask yourself, "What is that beautiful house?"
You may ask yourself, "Where does that highway go to?"
And you may ask yourself, "Am I right? Am I wrong?"
And you may say to yourself, "My God! What have I done?"

Letting the days go by, let the water hold me down
Letting the days go by, water flowing underground
Into the blue again, into the silent water
Under the rocks and stones, there is water underground
Letting the days go by, let the water hold me down
Letting the days go by, water flowing underground
Into the blue again after the money's gone
Once in a lifetime, water flowing underground

Same as it ever was, same as it ever was
Same as it ever was and look where my hand was
Time isn't holding up, time isn't after us
Same as it ever was, same as it ever was
Same as it ever was, same as it ever was
Same as it ever was, same as it ever was

Letting the days go by, same as it ever was
Here a twister comes, here comes the twister
Same as it ever was, same as it ever was (Letting the days go by)
Same as it ever was, same as it ever was (Letting the days go by)
Once in a lifetime (Let the water hold me down)
Letting the days go by (Water flowing underground)
Into the blue again

I strongly suspect that the entire song was about a midlife crisis. The idea of working for stuff, and then finding you have to keep working your whole life. Right now though, I was intimately aware that there is water at the bottom of the ocean. And I was most certainly wanting to remove the water!

LUCY

So anyway, we left Eden, and tried to sail straight back to the Eastern Continent where Tamashii's other mom awaited. But of course, it was never that simple. I saw the telltale signs: strong wind, heavy clouds, and a darkened sky. I knew what was coming, even before the storm arrived. Torrential rain poured down upon our heads, gusts of wind whipped at us, and I saw thunder off in the distance. But then, I noticed the telltale swirling winds as my hair flapped in midair like a sail, and I knew we were in hurricane. "Oh shit," I said.

I went through the checklist of surviving a hurricane. (1) Have plenty of ballast. Check. In addition to plenty of barrels and jars of preserved food, we'd loaded our Preserver with several pounds of meat and vegetables, and what couldn't fit was either cooked and dried until it was jerky, or salted, cured, and hung from the rafters. (2) Look for a port in the storm, preferably one with high cliffs or mountains to protect from winds. Uhhhh, pass. Not only were we in the middle of the ocean by the time the storm came up, but it was the middle of the night and a bit of fog had come up. I was careful to stay away from anything, since what I thought might be an island could instead be a group of rocks. (3) If all else fails and you face the hurricane, you try to steer for the area of the ocean that is going to see the shallowest waves and the lowest winds. The "clean" side of the storm is usually the side counterclockwise from its leading edge.

And yes, were tried to do that. But then, the winds whipped about, and part of the mast swiveled and whacked me. It wasn't a major concussion, more of a glancing blow, but as I started to lose consciousness, I saw Nevras standing nearby working the wheel and giving orders, "Tamashii heal her, Portia trim the sails, Sastra I need you to..." I didn't hear the rest.

The next day, the ship was completely sideways on the sand with the mast broken a thousand pieces, with only the sail cloth intact. I was on a mat with blankets near me and Nevras was in the middle of talking again when I opened my eyes, "...And the shipwright in town says it'll take a few days to put together a new one. Oh, it looks like she's up. How do do you feel, Lucy?"

I got up slowly, "Like I was hit by Lilith when she charges." In Kushiyama, some part of me imagined Lilith giving a small cute sneeze as we talked about her. "Well, anyway, it looks like we're stuck here," he said. "Where exactly is 'here', anyway?" I asked him. Tamashii pulled out the map. When we first set out, because we hadn't any good navigators, Yazim Jianne gave us a copy of our world map, only this one had a black arrow pointing to our current location. We had not used it before, as we were keeping it safe in case of emergency. Well, now it was an emergency. She read the location where the arrow was pointing, «Hinata.» Well, at least it didn't point us to some random place like Gruumi. Hinata was quaint, but there were people there that could help us. Sastra lifted the boat moved it over to the dock, dropping anchor. It had no mast, but there were plenty of supplies, and it wouldn't go anywhere. And then we entered town.

"Looks like a festival is going on," I noted. It did indeed.

NEVRAS

While Lucy had been unconscious, the time on the boat had been no picnic. Tamashii and Lucy moved below deck, so they were insulated from the worst of it. All the same, had we hit something and gone under, they would be the first to drown. Thank God. That didn't happen. What we did have were fierce winds that threatened to blow the ship on its side, rains that beat hard at us and partially blinded us

while soaking our clothing, swirling waters that threatened to create a whirlpool and suck us all in or, and currents that slapped our ship to also put it at risk of being pitched over. Sastra had an important job, and that was keeping the ship from capsizing. To this end, stripped off her clothes and tossed them below deck then shut the hatch. I was worried that I'd have to endure a stark naked prematurely developed child, but she had a swimsuit underneath her clothes and she dove overboard for the long haul. Unlike her mother, who was a classic demon with dark hair, pale skin, wings, horns, and tail, Sastraneth had blond hair and elf ears, none of those things, except claws and teeth. She might even have been mistaken for an elf, but for a feral look, and the difference showed whenever she smiled. Her strength however was something entirely different. While the ship pitched, she swam over each time and righted it again. We had a rough time of it, but the boat was mostly okay. That is, until a freak wave came and sandblasted me, knocking me out. I dunno how we survived either. Probably a miracle happened, or maybe Sastra hauled the entire boat by the chain that held its anchor.

As for the festival, it was Matsuri. Now you may not know this, but Matsuri was a bit of a movable feast in Japan. Different places would have it during different times. But after the New Earth, only one location had Japanese festivals, maybe two if you count Goji (but they only celebrated festivals related to ghosts). This meant Matsuri was instead always related to the coming of spring. Over thousands of years, it became loosely synchronized to within a week or two Easter, which in turn stopped relying on lunar phases and always fell on the Holy Day (what people in the 20th century know as Sunday) on the same week as Passover. The current date was the 3rd of Pig (April), with Easter on the 9th. I hoped we could make it back to her by then.

I bought a yukata for everyone, even though the festival had already started. We weren't that late though. We saw a bunch of people carry a *mikoshi* shrine, and processing down the street, which is how we thought to ask what was going on in the first place. Our group wasn't polytheist for the most part (having actually seen God, and stuff like that) so we didn't offer thanks to the gods or kami spirits, but we did

thank God for bringing us safely on this trip. We thanked Sastra and Portia for their help.

The younger girls got some help from Lucy properly binding their *yukata*, while I set myself up in the other room. As I was born a boy, it would be improper to peep on them, and besides which, as I had gotten into crossdressing, that meant I had to do an awful lot of things that they probably didn't want to see either. I took off my blue leather armor, and stripped down. Then I put on a bra and some panties. I always carried some breast forms with me, so this part was a regular thing for this process. As I didn't have to shave much, the bulk of the process was figuring out how to tie the yukata. I had managed the makeup, and had tied my normally spiky hair back into a cute ponytail, but try as I might, the yukata wasn't coming together. "Here, let me help," said Lucy, sneaking behind me. First, she held the right side part of the yukata at my left side near the hip line, then she likewise moved the left side over top my right hip. She fastened a cloth belt around my waist, and tied it tightly in a bow to give me a feminine figure. "Why Nevras," Lucy said, "You look beautiful!" Everyone had floral designs on their yukata. I wore a magnolia yukata, Portia's was a sunflower, Sastraneth had a red spider lily, Tamashii had poppies, and Lucy was decked out in a yukata with black irises. The dark bearded iris was backed against a white coloring, and its fuzzy "bearded" portions matched her hair color.

LUCY

It turned out we weren't late after all. Like many other parades, it was possible to have multiple attractions from secular to religious stuff. Some of these were more like wagons which were dragged by groups of people with ropes, others had to be carried with poles, and still others were floats with depictions of Shinto heroes, gods, or villains. Matsuri began with a the idea of carrying an object that was consider holy around, but quickly descended into partying and revelry.

For kids and teenagers, there were booths selling fish that were caught with rice paper, there were toys, games to play, and various festival foods (*okonomiyaki*, *ramune*, *takoyaki*, *yakitori*, shaved ice or *kakigori*, and candied fruits).

For adults though, the highlight was drinking. Ambrosia liked to stay stone cold sober, and I fully got it. It was no fun waking up saying, "Well, how did I get here?" But Nevras got caught up in the festival spirit, and forgot to pace himself. Pretty soon, he was so drunk, that he was starting to have trouble seeing and remembering things, and when he looked at me, he said, "Ambrosia, you look so hot tonight. I would do anything to make you happy." I realized that if I had corrected him, or probably even spoken and revealed my voice, I would never get what I really wanted. How do I work this? Yes, it was wrong of me to cheat, but all I could think of what that my other half got to experience this, but I only got to watch indirectly through her eyes. I pretended to cough. Nevras nodded, "I get it, all that fried food probably bothered your throat. Just show me where to go, and what you want." I made a come hither gesture with my index finger, then pointed to a dark alley where people weren't really paying attention. When he asked what I wanted, I made an obscene insertion gesture. "Ahhhhh, I got it. You're feeling horny tonight, Ambrosia?" It was difficult for him to tell the difference between blue and purple hair in the evening. The other three were more than happy to maintain silence and leave us alone for awhile, after they got bribed some money to good off for awhile. When I was satisfied that we were in a sufficiently dark area, I peeled of his clothes, leaving on his bra and breast forms, while removing his panties. I wanted the impression of having sex with a submissive futanari. I pushed him to the ground, being careful not to mess up his hair. With both hands, I stroked at his shaft until it stood upright. But before he could come, I tightened my fingers around his shaft, cutting off the flow. "Ahhh..." he gasped. I slid on top of his erect member and felt as his warm sperm uncorked inside of me. I rode him up and down until I bled. My first time, and it felt wonderful, yet horrible for what I had done, and yet, "Aaaaaaaaaahhh!!! Yesssss! So gooood~~~!!!" I quieted down, after realizing that we could be heard from the street. But more importantly, Nevras sat up and took a closer look at my face. Uh oh.

NEVRAS

This is not my beautiful wife! "Lucy?!? Is that your voice I hear?" I

asked. She blushed, though it was dark enough that I could be sure I saw it. Then she made an attempt to impersonate Ambrosia's voice but I already remembered now that Ambrosia was back across the sea. "No it's not Lucy... Okay, you got me. It's me. I'm sorry, I just... It felt like Ambrosia got you all to her herself, and well, I'm a part of you, but I knew you'd never cheat." I asked, "Would you like to continue?" This time I could see her eyes blink, "Huh?!?" I explained, "You're right, it's not fair to you. You need some relief from all of this. Just this one time, I'll agree to it." She sighed, then nodded, "But call me Ambrosia. It turns me on." And so for the next half-hour, we role-played. Well, sorta. Any onlooker who had seen Ambrosia have sex wouldn't think Lucy behaved anything like her. "Oh, Ambrosia," I said, "You're so forward tonight." I did my best impersonation of her voice, "Nevras, take me now~~~!" He got on top of me, and thrust inside. "Oh no, you don't! I want a piece of this. ***cough*** I mean... Oh no, you don't! I want a piece of this." I rolled him over and proceeded to dominate him sexually, touching his breast forms, and calling him a sissy, while I told him that he needed "permission" to come. We both knew this was a bluff, and after awhile, I let him touch my breasts, kiss me, and everything else. I just wanted to do some femdom play. The roleplay stuff was arousing to me, but eventually we realized hours had passed, and we had no idea where our kids were. I helped Nevras get cleaned back up for the festival, and re-fastened both of our yukata. We walked back out to the street like nothing happened. My God, what have I done?

I was obviously pregnant with his child. I dunno how I knew, but I just knew. But for all we knew, while we were out having fun, the others might have been kidnapped! A psychic, a Seraphim, and an incredibly strong demon getting kidnapped? It could happen, I tell you! We walked around, fully expecting to search for them for hours. The mikoshi were being carried back at night, this time carrying paper lanterns, and with musicians warning of its presence with various instruments playing. Instead of spending hours looking, we found her only two blocks away playing jan ken po for some sort of prize. "Hey there! So how was the sex?" she asked. Ambrosia really needed to do

something about her troubling unchildlike personality. Kids just didn't ask such things! "It was..." I blushed.

JESUS

I was in the desert in the beginning of my ministry, and tempted by things like throwing myself off a high ledge, or worshiping Satan for money or "power" over the world. But one of the more difficult temptations in my early ministry was simply to try to turn bread into stones. Oh wait no, it was stones into bread. The idea being that I use my powers for personal gratification. But some people ask why when I resisted this temptation, I turned around and gave food to four or five thousand people.

So let me explain. That day, I was trying to teach the people the secrets of thaumaturgy, "Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat, or about your body, what you will wear. For life is more than food, and the body more than clothes. Consider the ravens: They do not sow or reap, they have no storehouse or barn; yet God feeds them. How much more valuable you are than the birds! Consider how the lilies grow: They do not labor or spin. Yet I tell you, not even Solomon in all his glory was adorned like one of these. And do not be concerned about what you will eat or drink. Do not worry about it. Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you." The crowd looked at me blankly, "What do you mean?" I explained, "Suppose I wanted to bring rain to this dry mountain. I would only need to ask, *God, open the skies to us, and let there be rain.*" Immediately, a steady rain soaked everyone thoroughly. "Okay, Jesus, we get it! Make it stop!" I nodded, "*Let the noise stop! Water is no longer needed here.*" Actually, there were a number of ways that I could have stopped the rain. I taught them that it wasn't the specific words that were important, but the intention behind them, "And when you are praying, do not use meaningless repetition as the Gentiles do, for they suppose that they will be heard for their many words. And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites. For they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by men. Pray simply, for I tell you, God hears you even if you shut yourself up inside a

room and are heard by no man." I showed them an example of how simple a prayer could be, "*Snow.*" And immediately, a freak snow storm came up. Seeing their discomfort, I showed that even making an X or other gesture of dismissal was enough to ask for the dismissal of something prayed for, that words weren't even needed for a prayer. When thaumaturgy later corrupted into magic and sorcery, this teaching about nonverbal communication was not lost. In fact, even after all supernatural power was forgotten by the human race, they continued to use body language descended from these very teachings.

Magic and sorcery, unlike thaumaturgy, could not create real food. And this was their thinking even while I had just said not to worry about what to eat, because God will provide. It was one thing to see weather effects, flashes of light, or the like. But crowd did not really believe that this thaumaturgy thing was anything other than a magic show. They weren't convinced they could do this, they thought I was able to just by being a special person. No, I could pray directly as God can, doing miracles by virtue of being God. But anyone can do these prayers. And more importantly, they had the impression that it was a nice magic show, but they were getting hungry and it was time to get home. "How many of you are hungry?" I asked, immediately seeing about four or five thousand hands shoot up. "Do we have any food?" I probed. A child showed me food in a basket , but it was only five loaves and two fish. Now the fish species that were commercially important in Roman times mostly species of the family Scombridae, such sturgeon, mullet, mullet, hake, bream, and moray. In the sea of Galilee were also barbels, catfish, carps, and what is known as St. Peter's Fish (a type of tilapia). But this was Pangaea, and the fish were a decent size. *Leedsichthys* was the big fish of the time, and it could get up to 16 yards or so. Another fish, the lobe-finned *Rhizodus*, was about 6 yards. But if you think a child caught a fully grown fish this big and heavy, you're delusional. These were lungfish. They were pretty cute in a goofy sort of way, but there was no way these were feeding five thousand people, not on their own. They had already been roasted over the fire, so there was no need to cook. So I told my disciples to divide the bread and fish into twelve baskets, one

for each of them and go around distributing them. Unlike government, that pretends to help, but most of its resources are wasted in bureaucracy, taxes, and dependence, they simply did as I asked, fully dubious that there a way this would happen. They had seen me do miracles before, but this was just too many. The crowd thought there were too many of them too. I thought better. Had not I given enough rain and snow for all of them to feel wet or cold? How was food any different? And so, both my disciples and the crowd were astonished when the basket opened filled with scraps of fish and pieces of bread. But surely, it wasn't enough for everyone to be full. Only there was.

It wasn't about being "unselfish." Communist groups tried to force people to share what they had, but there wasn't enough production. Instead of wealth for everyone, their mindset was about poverty. They had a zero sum game where what is taken or given is limited and transferable, never visualizing the ability to make more. In fact, their system was set up to hinder this exact ability, paying unproductive and productive equally, so there is no incentive to work harder.

When I gave, though, there was enough for everyone to be full. There was no shortage, only people who schemed with promises of equality and equity to make society that everyone but the top was equally pour. But when you love others as yourself, nobody is starving, nobody suffers, because you share what you *make*, not what you are trying to save. This was the essence of thaumaturgy, using your own energy to ask God. And so, what I showed them wasn't a magic trick, it wasn't some empty promise, it was God's love in action spread like rain through an entire crowd. It was like a festival, where as many people as came were able to get what they wanted. The festival was the product of the harvest, a way to use excess. In the same way, what God produces is enough to feed everyone in the world several times over, if only people could get out of their own way.

RENA

I wasn't able to get out of my own way. I was fixated on the idea that if Jesus helped some, he couldn't help others. That his time and

energy were limited. One day, I made a big fuss about how some lady used expensive perfumed oil and how this could have been used to feed the poor. Later accounts of this incident tell that I said this because I was a thief and was in charge of the treasury and used to skim some off the top. Ummmm, rude? Actually, like many people in Jesus's group, I was concerned that he was wasting his time and money on little people, on little problems, rather than conserving all of that for the big ticket items like the overthrow of the current system, and a new system of equality. But as I learned gradually over time, that was never his goal. What he was really getting rid of was the idea of zero sum game, that people couldn't make things in order to share, instead of giving from limited commodity. That forgiveness might in turn be enough to go around, not just conserved for the wealthy or those called "worthy."

But over time things changed. The Atlanteans stopped coveting the wealth of other countries, and started finding underwater deposits of gold. The Jews of this time returned to their Hebrew ways of seeing God as personal, even if they didn't believe in Jesus. The lizard people and the hybrids now had powers of their own. The lizard people stopped bothering the mortal world, because they had laboratories to clone their own food source, the flesh of a man named Lazarus (they named him this because like Lazarus of Christian lore, he kept coming back again and again through cloning). And over time, small productive rural towns cropped up, where everyone was able to ask for God and he gave it.

That is how things went down in the real death and resurrection of Jesus. People got it, and he did indeed bring about worldwide peace for a time. The temple did indeed fall as Jesus predicted, but nobody seemed to care. There were no dire end times prophecies, no bemoaning the loss of Jews. In this version of events, his death and resurrection were accepted. And it seemed to me that with that gone, there were no more problems. Daniel's prediction of a kingdom that would never be overthrown had been fulfilled, and we were set.

But there troubles lurking below the surface. I, Marina, Autumntwig, Arboria, and Aellisa all settled in a small quaint town

called Winter. I expected a long and peaceful existence. I met Alethea (who we called Alicia because her name was cumbersome to say), a girl that seemed to have powerful hidden abilities. And indeed, she later turned out to be the Oracle of Tao, and more importantly someone that I really cared for. But as idyllic is this town appeared, someone wasn't happy about all this peace and harmony. You see, every town filled with people who could use thaumaturgy was like a city on a hill, a beacon of light to shine on other areas. They too learned that with God, there is enough. But more importantly, all of that light was... kind of painful to the likes of demons. They had no town of their own that was protection from this energy. They got sicker and sicker as more and more towns cropped up, even if the people there only used minor abilities, as the effect was cumulative. And so, one night under the guidance of an archdemon Belial, they attacked. They destroyed town after town, including our own. The people who remained over the next few generations lost their way. Gradually, their thaumaturgy became simple magic, and from there the demons tempted them with the lure of sorcery. From there, it was an easy matter to convince them to nuke each other until the last person was gone.

What about God's kingdom that would never fall? God's Kingdom is not of this world. It can never be attacked, because it is the spirit of God in the people. Even if all people are destroyed, God can create again.

As for Alicia, I sent her to be reborn in the future. My friends and I spent our effort trying to survive and escape. But we never stopped hoping that Alicia would return, and rescue us, in the same way God sent Moses and Jesus.

Chapter 23

In which the trip back is a flashback montage, and Lord of the Rings is a lie

TAMASHII

We got a brand new mast, better than before, and the wind was in our favor. The trip from Kushiyama westward had taken weeks due to crappy navigation and even crappier wind, but now everything seemed to go right. As I sat on the deck Portia and I talked about our

past and how it was funny how everything had worked out. I thought about how all the times with friends and just hanging out could have led to this adventure. What would I do after this? Like, when I was older?

I had always been an outcast, and going on adventures was one way that I felt like I belonged. My friends and family had always been with me, but one day, my family would get older. Maybe I could be a professional adventure for after that happened? It made me wonder what sort of history led up to Ambrosia being born, which in turn led to her own adventure as Oracle of Tao.

RENA

After Winter fell, we were adrift. Alicia was gone, and none of us had holy powers. Belial's remaining demons hunted down humans who remembered Jesus or had thaumaturgy of their own, and our racial abilities were mostly elemental effects. It took me a very long time to learn how to get rid of demons, about the time needed for my ninth tail to grow, to be precise.

So we hid. We hid as Belial talked the last humans of the Ancient Earth into using sorcery as a weapon of war. We hid as the Middle Earth emerged after crossing the arctic rim to a new layer (the original Earth before the New Earth had a tendency to expand outward like a tree, with rings from previous times. The Ancient Earth became lifeless except for a few bacteria, but life quickly developed much to the consternation of demon-kind. In fact, the line from *The Matrix* where Smith calls humans a virus? Well, that idea came from Malthus. But it came from Belial first. While humanity had millions of years to develop in the Ancient Earth, the Middle Earth developed humans, elves, dwarves, the Ainur (who became wizards and balrogs), the Ents, and the lesser known Drúedain within only a few thousand years. But we saw firsthand while watching them in secret, that these were a people who did not know God. They lived in happiness, yes. And Jesus's grace was upon them when they died. But none of the teachings of the past were known to them. All it took was a magic ring forged of great power, and they all were enslaved.

Oh yes, many of you have read the *Lord of the Rings*. But the

outcome of that story is a happy lie. In actuality, Frodo died of poison from a certain sword. Elrond was not able to heal him. Fighting broke out over who was to take the ring, and without Frodo to volunteer, the fellowship never formed. In that reality, Sauron won, and Belial won. But there was something he didn't count on. Us.

After watching the free people of the land enslaved and then destroyed, I was ready to give up. "Evil is too powerful," I said. But then I heard a voice as though from a distance but steadily getting closer, "Nonsense. Darkness borrows the power of light, it is actually quite weak." I looked at the source of the voice, and gasped, "Jesus! You're here! I thought you had gone." He shook his head, "Do not be afraid, for evil is not infallible. I am an eternal being. I cannot die, and I am always with you even when you cannot see me. But in a form without a human body, I can only be seen clearly by humans who know me. All others see me as behind a veil. A curtain. You remember, right?" Oh yes, I remembered. The temple in Israel had a heavy curtain that was to represent human separation from God. He explained, "That curtain was to remain open. But while humans can still access my grace, none of them know of me. They only know of wars and power. You can try to save them, of course. But their salvation is in the Afterlife, not this dying world. Belial believes that this world matters, and this is why he seeks to kill my people, and hopes to erase my message. But behold, in the blink of an eye, it is new again." Out of thin air, he produced the great religious texts of Buddhism, Shintoism, Judaism, Taoism, and the teachings of Jesus, along with thousands of writings in medicine, science, and philosophy. He handed us a First Silver box to carry them in. "Share these teachings of mine," Jesus said, "The world that is about to appear, the modern Earth will need them. Decided the place and time to share each piece of knowledge. And split us so that Belial cannot track you.

And we did. We showed the Egyptians how to build pyramids, keeping secret the fact that they were actually flying battleships until they were ready. Historians called them tombs, of all things. We showed certain groups how to make aqueducts, various types of

medicine, and even gunpowder. We copied snippets of religious writings a little at a time, guiding history in the way we wanted it. Soon, we had a number of religions and powerful civilizations, the exact climate for a Jesus event.

"But what do we do now?" I asked. Now that I knew Jesus was there, I could often see him and talk to him. "I want you to pose as me," Jesus explained. I blinked, "Why can't you return and die for everyone again?" Jesus sighed, "Well, I certainly could incarnate, or possess a body, or something like that. But the purpose of my death and resurrection was a single sacrifice for all sins. You are to explain my teachings. The world has salvation, and had it long before any of them remember. But they do not *know* that they have salvation. They believe their salvation comes from following laws."

I knew what teaching them about Jesus meant. But I loved Jesus with all my heart, and I was okay with dying, even if that meant never seeing Alicia again. There were a few differences this time around. Like, I still wasn't able to purify demons, so they possessed my enemies, and there was a great amount of resistance to Christianity as they called it (completely missing the point that it was not about worshiping Jesus but about understanding the concepts of grace and forgiveness), inventing reasons why I couldn't be the Messiah. They were right, of course, I wasn't the Messiah. I was an impostor. Nonetheless, I was able to enter Jerusalem by the Eastern Gate, so I suppose Jesus helped make that happen.

It was good news for me that Jesus raised me from the dead. I didn't want to sit in the ground forever after having done his work for him. But many things about history were different this time, and I suspected Belial's hand at work.

The Romans, unlike the Atlanteans, did not readily embrace Christ but conspired with the Jews to spread a lie that his followers had taken his body. Right, these followers who were (as far as the Jews and Romans knew) regular humans, made it past armed guards, pushed away a large boulder, and then they hauled away a body without anyone noticing it.

There were also many heresies of Jesus's teachings. The Judaizers,

the people who tried to convince everyone that Jesus taught to follow laws, to be good and this would get you into heaven. There were also the Catholics, the Mormons, the Jehovah's Witnesses, and the Muslims. Each of these had something insincere about their teachings. The Mormons and Muslims were cults where the leader had said God had talked to them personally, and spent a lot of their time trying to set up a worldly kingdom instead of accepting that the kingdom of God was already here; these two also taught polygamy as they accepted women as less than men, and both had violent armies to enforce their teachings. Jehovah's Witnesses taught instead of the gospel, the notion of the Second Coming. Like the Judaizers before them, they did not understand that Jesus's resurrection *was* the Second Coming, and that he came to forgive sins not to judge those who had broken the law. They also thought Jesus was an angel rather than God, and that only 144 thousand people will be saved. In other words, they are believers in Revelation, not the Gospel. As for the Catholics, they taught that Mary is the Mother of God (a gross heresy), that bread and wine literally become Jesus's flesh and blood (that's a magic trick, not theology), and for quite awhile they had the same sort of marketplace going on as the Pharisees, this time to sell indulgences. They taught man-made law, not God's truth.

Suspecting tricks from Belial, I operated in secret, teaching a few trusted people at a time how to develop spiritual awareness. Some of these became thaumaturgy experts, others helped teach people a better way to live by acting as mentors. Eventually though, they helped me find out who Alicia was. Only there was a problem. The child they found had memories of Alicia's past life, and the same powers from before. But this was a boy named Emett. Alicia had been a close friend, but I didn't know how to deal with this. And so, I worked on Emett, changing forms as had been my power as a foxgirl, attempting to get him to notice me. When his awareness reached the point where Emett understood who I was, and remembered she was Alicia, I finally made a meeting possible. I trained Alicia to be the Oracle of Tao, but I was out of my depth. Belial had planted five Statues of Darkness at key points in order to corrupt the Earth to darkness. We

managed to stop that plan, but then Alicia made a strange decision to sacrifice herself for demons. I blame myself for being to soft on her, I guess. After that, Belial was sealed away, and then something strange happened. Because I was horribly depressed after Alicia kinda went and blew herself up, Jesus made a deal. Jesus needed a body again, and I wanted to forget the physical world and be with Alicia. So that's where I am now. Jesus took my body, and I'm a spirit. I got to be with Alicia after all, but I have no idea what happened next.

GOD

After that, there was a bit of an evil cloud of darkness (like in the Japanese NES game *Final Fantasy III*), and so I split split the Earth into a New Earth and the Realm of Void.

It was a new Earth, all right, but of course human beings continued to make imperfect decisions. Jesus, in Rena's body, appeared to humans in many forms and guided humanity along a better path. Humans developed various powers, though now that demons were in an actual town, magic rather than thaumaturgy was more common. Unlike before though, there wasn't a strong push towards sorcery. Other disciplines like geomancy, enchantment, and alchemy became common.

And unlike before, humanity wasn't plagued with constant wars. They had one war called the Great Phoenix War (if I remember correctly, it was started when the Prime Minister of Kushiyama was teased by a child in Phoenix, and he retaliated by killing the entire family while the kid was made to watch; that kid later became the king of Phoenix), which was so long, bloody, and chaotic that a group formed after this to make certain no more wars existed. They concluded after a great deal of philosophy and debate, that the reason for wars between countries is that leaders craved land or power. They concluded that the primary reason for civil wars was that although leaders craved land or power, common people desired to be left alone. They couldn't control people's desires, but they could limit government. And so, they mostly did away with income tax and property tax, and set up a system known as the Anti-Government Council.

They weren't perfect (they polluted Eden and confined Jesus to the town limits of Kushiyama), but they managed to keep the world free from drama for thousands of years. Eventually though, Belial was going to convince the sorcerer Yazim Jianne that if he was freed, the guy's wife Sarai would be able to be raised. This was despite resurrection spells being common. Did I mention he was a mad scientist? This world already had a Savior. What it needed right now was a Hero. And so, I searched for a woman who would bear my child. A found a woman named Manna Leaven. I won't get into any sex scenes, but I think we're up to just before the start of the book *Oracle of Tao*. She carried out my will, and now she's a mess, and it's entirely her fault. What? It couldn't be my fault!

Chapter 24

In which everyone wonders if Ambrosia was a mental patient all along

TAMASHII

We sailed up the coast in record time, and were about to walk towards Kushiyama when three ships came into view. The Council had tracked us after all! "Hold it!" a man said, projecting his voice like he was speaking through a loudspeaker using a wand, "You can't go any further." He cast a Slow spell, and around us it was like one of those Keystone Cops scenes, only Lucy and I were going at normal speed. They had us surrounded, and the main guy at least was a skilled wizard. "Oh, come on!" I said, "What do you want already?"

"You know too much! You obviously plan to expose the Council's dealings in Eden to the world. This is why you went to a big town like Kushiyama," he explained. Lucy shook her head, "I do not care about such things! My other self is sick, and only Knowledge of Good & Evil will save her." He blinked, "Is this true?" He was facing me, knowing that a sweet and innocent child like me would not lie. He was wrong, but anyway. "Yeah, it's true," I said, "We picked up supplies at Eden, and we picked up this Fruit here." I showed him the dragonfruit thing. We didn't tell them that we'd cleaned up their ecological disaster, or that they'd probably never again be able to pollute Eden because the ground was saturated with the Tree of Life's nutrients. Some things were better left unsaid, and we didn't want

them to have a reason to both us immediately. The Council assistant agreed to let us be, provided he could follow at a distance to verify my story. I got him to agree he'd leave us alone forever (since I knew he might be back after finding out about Eden, he might be back), and to get it in writing. Contracts, once signed, had unbreakable magic, unlike in times before magic where people could just claim we were entitled to land or had rights, but the contract wasn't worth the paper it was printed on. And so, we made it into the town of Kushiyama.

AMBROSIA

I awoke in a sterile white room. Nearby, another patient was screaming. In another nearby room, several Denialists were chanting, "Nothing is real, nothing is real, nothing is real, nothing is real..." In still another, a delusional man sung, "I'm Henry the VIII, I am! I'm Henry the VIII, I am, I am!" He carried on a little longer, but I tuned him out. I couldn't see how he could possibly justify that.

I was aware that I was probably in the schizophrenic section of a psych ward. I was admitted because I was catatonic. I was out of it, but not stupid. And although I often couldn't tell the difference between reality and delusion, it looked like I was clearly here. So that meant all of that quest to be an Oracle of Tao, that was all a delusion of grandeur. Which meant, I had never met Nevras or the others, I had never had Tamashii as a child, and never been anything but a beggar who eventually was hospitalized for disturbed behavior.

I felt a pang of sadness, a loneliness of a life that could have been. Oh well, I thought, as I stared off into space. The orderly came in and handed me a series of pills. Even with the latest medicine, for treatment-resistant schizophrenia, no combination actually worked, I heard the orderly complain to the doctor. "Doesn't matter," he said, "Up the dosage anyway. Family and other providers pay us to treat, not to cure. As long as they send them away, they expect us not to bother them, and just send a check to us if we say that they are 'coping well with the medication.'" I suppose I would be appalled by the cynicism, but at this point, I didn't care about anything either.

I looked at the pills with a vague indifference, noting only what I was given. One yellow and long capsule, three powdery purple discs,

two powdery white medicines, one long orange capsule (this one was powder rather than with an outer capsule part), a red and white capsule, and three green and yellow capsules. It occurred to me that there could be anything at all in these, but I just swallowed the medicine and downed the water. The next day, same thing. The day after, more of the same. The medicine didn't work though. No matter what, I had vivid memories of life filled with adventure. That felt real, this sitting in a room kinda didn't. On Sunday, or maybe it was Thursday, they took me outside by wheelchair in the park outside. I could walk just fine, but they wanted to be sure I didn't wander off I suppose. Then it was time for a bath, and more medicine.

The orderly looked a bit strange. I had a vision of someone looking exactly like her wearing sturdy shoes and using a grappling hook to climb a city wall before being arrested. When I was lucid enough to talk, I sometimes talked about seeing people in the institute before with my therapist. My therapist, for instance, looked like the king of Kushiyama, at least before stuff happened to him. But sharing what I saw usually made things worse. They upped my dosage, they declared that more supervision was needed, they did everything but just give me peace and quiet so my mind would settle. The medicine didn't give me any relief from these "memories" as I called them, but it made my stomach hurt like I had ulcers or something.

One day was different from the others. An orderly, this one looking like Koren from these memories, informed me that I had a visitor, "Your twin sister is here to see you." But I didn't remember having one. A girl with blue hair and a face like mine, but far too pretty to be any sister of mine, entered the cell that I was in. "COULD WE BE ALONE FOR A FEW MINUTES?" she asked. The orderly nodded, "But no more than five minutes. Visiting times are limited." She closed the door, and the girl who looked like a Shiny version of me, went from seemingly relaxed to urgent. "WE NEED TO GET YOU OUT OF HERE, AMBROSIA," she insisted, "YOU'RE IN KUSHIYAMA RIGHT NOW. YOU'RE IN A COMA, AND YOU'RE GETTING WORSE! YOU NEED TO WAKE UP NOW!" I was just lucid enough to protest apparently, "What are you talking about? There is no Kushiyama! There never was. Doctor Yamingka says that the whole

place was a representation of my need to fight authority figures. Authority figures are good." The other me, who just now told me her name was Sapphire by the way, asked me, "WHAT ARE YOU TALKING ABOUT?!? THE AMBROSIA I KNOW WASN'T A REVOLUTIONARY, BUT SHE CERTAINLY WOULDN'T JUST SIT HERE ALL DAY TAKING HER MEDICINE AND DEFENDING HER THERAPIST. THAT DOES IT, I'M TAKING YOU OUTSIDE! BEING OUT OF THIS PSYCH WARD MIGHT HELP YOU ESCAPE THIS WORLD." Behind her the lock clicked open, and the orderly said, "I think not. I'll be reporting this to the doctor, and you will be banned from this hospital in the future." Sapphire threw a right hook, and the girl I associated with Koren went down. "DUMB BITCH," Sapphire said as I stared awestruck, "I NEVER LIKED HER, ALWAYS TRYING TO TAKE NEVRAS. CAN YOU WALK?" I shrugged. "ON SECOND THOUGHT, LET'S GET YOU A WHEELCHAIR." While Koren was out, she took her keys, then switched clothes with her, putting her into a brown dress, while she donned a white medical cap, some translucent stockings, and a white nurse's dress. She kept her old shoes as she was a bigger size. She locked the door, and turned a second lock to make it soundproof. Sapphire's hair was a shade of blue that didn't match... well, anything in this hospital, but after a moment in the bathroom fixing her look, she found a wheelchair for me, and she had a dull brown wig. I fully expected her blue eyebrows to expose her, but it looked like she had colored it.

She led me to a wheelchair and got me to sit down in it. When people asked, she insisted that she was talking me out in the park for recreation. She got as far as the front door when a nurse screamed, "That nurse doesn't have a nameplate! And she isn't wearing regulation shoes!" I looked down to notice that she had some comfortable brown boots but they indeed were not the white heels commonly worn on the hospital floors. "Someone stop her!" Some nice young men in white coats were coming to take me away. Sapphire ran, pushing the wheelchair as fast as she could. She had to turn left to go down a ramp, losing precious space between herself and the hospital staff. She turned and raced through the park, making it 50 ft from the gate. 40 ft. 30 ft. The gate was starting to close, but left me for a second, and ripped the fencing off the gate, losing more

precious time. She started for the gate again, but several people grabbed her, and the wheelchair toppled. I was about ten feet away, as Sapphire screamed, "RUN! ***RUN*!!!**" I looked back for just a second, and it seemed that rather than regular nurses and staff, they were some sort of Monster trying to pull her apart. Sapphire went down in a bloody mess. I took her advice. I ran through the gate.

JESUS

Sapphire and I were keeping Ambrosia stable. She was now about 30 lb less than her normal post-split weight. In the New Earth, things like hunger and thirst didn't matter as much as the original Earth. In other words, you couldn't starve or become obese very easily. A man wandering in the wilderness wouldn't want to starve to death, so he wouldn't. But an anorexic or bulimic would be able to mess up their body greatly, as would someone who thought fat is beautiful. The same principle applied to pregnancy. It was not impossible to get someone pregnant through rape, unless they wanted to have a child as consequence. Such children would be like clones of the mother (although male copies were not unheard of), having nothing to do with the father.

All of a sudden, Sapphire felt something as part of Ambrosia that I couldn't sense. She used all of her power, and she collapsed. I checked her pulse. Nothing. She was an empty husk. Ambrosia opened her eyes, still mostly out of it, but aware enough to scream when seeing Sapphire with eyes open on the ground. I closed them.

Tamashii arrived not long after, with a fruit that I recognized immediately as the Fruit of Knowledge. "Give it to her, and break off a piece for Lucy, she needs some too." Lucy tasted it, "I dunno why you gave me this, I'm a separate person and it's not like need... ***munch*** ***munch*** See, I don't need any... My voice! It's changed!" I said, "Not just that. You're a separate person now. You can have Nevras's child if you want. You aren't tied to all this anymore." Lucy did in fact remain close to them, but this time it was out of bonds of love rather than any sort of commitment.

The change to Ambrosia was more subtle, but in some ways much more profound. Weeks before, she wasn't eating, now she demanded

food, as much as they had. They gave her the salted fish, the pickled vegetables, the marmalade, even the fresh meat and produce from the visit to Eden. The healing previously didn't take, but now Jesus healing her worked with all the food she just ate, restoring her to normal weight. But not just that. Before all this, she still thought of Lucy as "Evil Ambrosia" but now she called her Lucy like everyone else. Now she seemed to regard her as a sister she never had.

And something else. Ambrosia had always been kinda deadpan, lacking in empathy toward others, and unable to notice even some things about her own family, but now she was perceptive about emotions. She approached Tamashii and gave her a big hug, aware that the trip had been long. She worried over Nevras, and gave him a long kiss. She looked at Lucy with a knowing glance, possibly suspecting they had done something, but not seeming to mind. She was concerned for Tamashii's friends, who didn't get as much screen time as they could have. And then she noticed me.

"You," she pointed to me, "There's something you need to ask of me, isn't there?" I explained about how long ago, I had possessed the body of Rena as she was mourning the original Oracle, Alicia. "But I thought the Oracle before me was supposed to be a boy? That doesn't sound like a very boyish name," she asked. I explained the whole transmigration thing, and how Alethea had originally been a girl, but... well it was complicated. Ambrosia shrugged. "So basically, you want me to use the the Tao to heal instead of hurt something? I've never tried this before." The Tao te Ching had a saying about the right side being auspicious in war while the left side being auspicious in affairs of state. Rotating the Tao this way the last time was what caused Alicia her life. I wonder if Ambrosia would be okay?

Epilogue

In which the curtain falls for the performance. See you next time!

GOD

The tide was coming in. The little girl looked as her creations, knowing that this time she would not be able to rebuild. She knew that this time everything would wash away. She knew the world was ending. For you see, that little girl was me.

The so-called "Christian" apocalypse depicts me and by extension Jesus getting super-pissed with humanity and never forgiving them. I'd like to take a moment her and explain that no part of this is what I want or had anything to do with what I inspired the writers of the rest of the Bible to say. My book was inspired word but Revelation was man-made fiction, less even than what you are reading this very moment. It was a fantasy of revenge by very petty people, written after most of their friends died senseless and their temple was destroyed. But you see, I gave them plenty of warnings. After Jesus died, I visited on those who loved and cared for them the truth about what happens after death. They saw Jesus return. They saw Jesus appear in different forms, free from restraints of the physical reality. And they saw the power of the Holy Spirit, as they themselves lost fear of death. They were empowered and able to do miracles.

On the other hand, the Romans and the Jews abhorred my message, and tried to bury it under nonsense. The Jews that rejected me were experiencing several signs, which were recorded in the Talmud. The doors of the temple swung open, signifying that Jerusalem would be under threat of attack. The light of the temple traditionally had one candle that did not need to be relit, but now it was not lasting the night. The lot cast for the sacrifice continually went to scapegoat. And when they did make an offering anyway, the cloth stayed red instead of turning white. All of this meant something had fundamentally changed about how atonement worked, and more importantly that for the time being I wasn't putting up with their shit. Sorry, language.

Oh yes, I could get plenty mad at my creations. I was mad enough sometimes to punish them, after all. But no part of me getting mad involved destroying the entire world. And tossing a bunch of people into a lake of fire? That's what *you* might want for your worst enemy. But my eye is on even the sparrow. At every moment, I had to care about every living thing from the tiniest bird that chirped as it was dying. And I told the Jews that I loved them and I meant it. Just like a jilted girlfriend, I might do the equivalent of slashing tires. I helped Carrie Underwood write *Before He Cheats*, after all... especially some of the destruction effects in the music video. I also helped Sara

Bareilles write *Love Song* for that matter, which has nothing to do with romance by the way. It's about her sadistic managers who kept pushing her to produce, and drawing a parallel between an abusive boyfriend and crappy managers.

So why was the world ending? I mean, right now, I wasn't particularly mad, and I wasn't more depressed than normal. Well, it's simple. Just look around you. Plants drop their leaves or fruits or otherwise during certain times of the year. The most notable example is autumn, where all deciduous trees lose foliage. There are cycles to the season, but there are also cycles to life and death. And even I must eventually die so that something new might be born. That was the Oracle cycle.

You're shocked, I can see. But consider this passage, "For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face." And this one, "And it shall come to pass in that day, you shall call me My Husband, and shall not call me anymore: My Lord." It was never my intention to be some aloof omniscient, omnipresent, and omnipotent being that just kinda sat around waiting for human prayers. But for that to happen, this world and everything about it has to die and be reborn. Like birds, plants, or people, even the Earth itself, everything must go. The humans will be sent to the Afterlife, and then Jesus will be how God is seen after that. If this seems out of nowhere, I've been dropping small hints to this effect for years. For example this was hinted in the hit video game series *Lunar*, which was re-released as *Lunar: Silver Star Story Complete, Lunar: Silver Star Story Touch*, and *Lunar: Silver Star Harmony.* It also had a sequel *Lunar: Eternal Blue*, but never mind that for now (and there was *Lunar: Dragon Song* but really never mind that, as it is considered one of the worst JRPGs ever). The main girl turns out to be the goddess Althena, who decided to be made mortal to spend her life around other humans rather than them fighting over prayers. I'd like to believe that this series had some sort of reincarnation going on, though. I've always been partial to the idea that while our lives are precious, I can see the people I meet in some form at a later time, that nothing is lost, everything is transformed. There was also *Magic Knight Rayearth*, a quirky anime where the

main characters are teleported from Tokyo Tower in Japan to a land of will known as Cephiro. In it, the Pillar rules everything as an all-powerful king or queen. But the Pillar cannot fall in love, because when they do, everything crumbles. So they send the Magic Knights to basically assassinate them, and nobody from Cephiro can do the job. The second season is about a struggle for succession as Pillar, in which one of the Magic Knights turns out to be the new Pillar candidate. She decides, however, that what she wants is to abolish the Pillar system and give the power to all the people who love Cephiro. The series ends as they want to visit Cephiro one last time, this time as historians. Having a loved one for each of them certainly helps too.

While Jesus coexisted with me and the Holy Spirit, there was this concept of the Trinity that nobody understood. But ultimately, I intended to revert the Holy Spirit to the power of human prayer, and have my son Jesus run things more directly. The tide began to churn. Very soon, all things will end and renew again.

AMBROSIA

I finished the steps required to release the Tao. I was glad that it managed to work, as things were very scary there for a moment. Jesus had already split my body through his actions into three separate bodies, myself, my dark side who insisted now that she wasn't dark at all but a shadow, or an "elucidation" as she liked to call it (referencing the fact that a shadow only appears when light shines on it, just as a good explanation "shines a light" on misunderstandings) or "Lucy", and the shadow of the part of me that astral projected as God. But to be honest, I think this name was chosen purely because of its similarity to a film by the same name where the heroine is a sort of goddess character.

But I think some part of me must not have wanted that anymore, wanted to abdicate as God in order that someone better was in charge, because now that body lay there empty of my soul. I didn't want the memories of the past that came from omniscience, and I definitely didn't want confusing images of the future. Omnipotence was a temptation to abuse power, and I increasingly learned that I was never cut out to be more than a regular human anyway. Doing things for

myself meant I screwed up my life, no matter how much power I had. And all of this was before I used my power to murder Estheriel in cold blood. I think I must have also subconsciously wished that, because now my dark side was fully-formed and I couldn't merge her back into me. Now that I was emotionally healthy again, that should have been a simple matter. Was it just me, or did her skin have a sort of glow?

But the main thing we wanted to use the Tao for had been accomplished. Jesus's body had split in two. There was Rena and Jesus standing next to each other, two foxgirls straight out of a Doublemint commercial. However, you could easily tell them apart when they talked. Jesus was soulful and serious, while Rena was a frisky foxy lady with pretty high sex drive, who was suddenly looking pretty lonely.

I expected the Tao to disappear as it did its job, but it started to rotate on its own, giving off a Resonance that didn't seem to have anything to do with me. Normally, when I used the Tao, there was a sort of connection between myself and whatever I was trying to do, but right now I felt no connection to what was happening. It was like the Tao decided to resonate itself. What a mysterious force it was.

After watching it for a few minutes, I made a conjecture. When reviving Rena by giving Jesus a spare body, it had picked up on her desires. The Tao seemed to heal by splitting or transferring, so I let it do its thing. And its thing was to transfer a soul into God's empty body. Now Alicia had what was my body, but it had become the body of a cute and rather feminine guy. As I liked Nevras, I could see why Alicia had so much appeal to Rena.

Alicia looked like he hadn't shaved though. He was definitely presenting as male right now. And he was naked, having been remade as an adult from leftover parts from me. Rena looked him over, blushed, and pounced on him. "Alright then," she said, "You've been outside a real body for far too long. We need to give you a makeover." Rena shaved his arms, legs, chest, and face. She tucked Alicia's guy parts away, and put her in some nice lingerie and boots. She waxed Alicia's eyebrows, did her makeup, and slipped her into a long green dress, and permed her hair. By the end of this, Alicia looked vaguely

like Fuu Hououji.

After Alicia was looking fully dressed and fabulous, Jesus explained though that the New Earth wouldn't last much longer. He explained, "The world would end eventually so it's no big deal, but I predict will probably end in only a few generations. All of you had better live your lives to the fullest. Hey, that's good advice anyway, I suppose!"

Elias, Azrael, Zoe, Aqorm, Yazim Jianne, and Selqui had been by my side for much of this time. I was in a coma after all. "Is there anything we can do?" asked Elias, concerned? If there were people that could help, it was Yazim Jianne, Selqui, and Elias. All of them knew advanced magical theory, and had studied a number of disciplines over the course of their lives. Aqorm, not so much, I think. Jesus looked at the group, and pointed, "You and you, the rest, no." To our surprise, Jesus had pointed to Azrael and Zoe. Azrael was nearly as bookish as Elias at times, but mainly only supernatural theories and methods of Exorcism, so she asked, "Why us?" To which Jesus explained, "Both of you put your lives aside to save each other. Both of you gained eternity as a result of your efforts." Zoe shook her head, "I still don't understand. Michael and Lilith..." Jesus interrupted, "Are immortal, not eternal." To this, Aqorm interrupted, "Is there are difference? I mean, I became an elf, and I wouldn't die a hundred thousand years from now."

Azrael explained, "According to *Oxford Dictionary of the Supernatural*, beings that are immortal cannot die of age. Beings that are invincible cannot be killed. And beings that are eternal are outside of time, having no beginning or end, and thus cannot die of old age or mot natural causes. Jackson Ward as the editor of the 5th edition theorized that there are really (at least) two tiers of eternity, greater and lesser. A lesser eternal is eternal with regard to the world they live in, but will die if it is wiped out of existence or suffers a time crisis. A greater eternal is outside not only time but regular existence, and there is nothing that will kill them outright. This is why Alicia and Ambrosia had to voluntarily give up their link to God's powers in order to transfer them over, God is a greater eternal, and also able to defy any attempts for another person to destroy him." Jesus nodded,

"Yes but there's something you don't know." Jesus called the two of them over for a few moments of private discussion.

ZOE

So anyway, we went over to talk to Jesus, probably expecting that he'd tell us that Azrael's theory about eternal creatures was wrong. But instead, he asked us, "You remember hearing about the Reapers, correct?" Azrael may be bookish with glasses to go with it, but I was a bit... well, we'll say that although the Aiken monastery that raised me prized education, they also thought well of martial arts. I tended to be closer to a jock than a scholar. Not that I'm stupid or anything, but I immediately said, "I have no idea what you are talking about, and I am proud of this fact." Azrael explained, "The Reapers are eternal beings that are supposed to have come about just after God created light. Is this accurate?" Jesus nodded, praising her, "You have done your research. And it's surprising, because I wasn't aware that any written records existed of the history of Reapers." Azrael explained, "Some time during our journey, I forget when, Ambrosia accidentally opened a portal to the Unseen World. We met several Reapers in this room, one of which was named Rinne. She made enough of an impression on Ambrosia that Tamashii's middle name is Rinne. Anyway, after seeing these beings, I did personal research, and tracked them down myself."

Jesus appeared deep in thought, "Then I suppose explaining this will be easier. The two of you are the reincarnations of these eternal beings. Specifically, you are Seishii, Reaper of Life. And you are Yomi, the Reaper of Death." He pointed to us so quickly that I'm not sure I got it straight, so I asked him again, "Which of us is which?" Jesus said, "You are Yomi, Reaper of Death. And you are Seishii, Reaper of Life." This time, I think he got us mixed up, because he pointed the same way despite starting in a different order. In any case, he continued his explanation, "You two were around since all of existence was made. You were eternal before you were granted the secret of eternity. You existed throughout all time and space to assist in all births and deaths. Then you fell in love with each other, and became bound in a cycle of birth and death yourself." He quickly

explained the events of *Tales from the Reaper*, including God's relationship with the Reaper known as Rinne. I asked, "So does this mean that you're dating Rinne? I mean,God is you, right?" He gave us some vague answer about time-space and the semblance versus actualizing of divinity, all while blushing profusely. I think what he meant was that he was sorta God, but not in the same way Ambrosia was, not yet anyway. So he couldn't date Rinne until... something happened.

"So anyway," Jesus said, "when all of created existence falls apart, you will survive. And unlike before, you'll be humans, not Reapers. But in terms of preventing the end of the world, no, I don't think you'll be able to help there. You will be there to teach the first new humans what's what, thought. As will I." There was a long pause, as we tried to process this information. Azrael asked, "So there is nothing that we can do about everything ending? What if you give us divine power?" Jesus shook his head, "If I gave you divine power, Conservation of Magic states that such power could be no more than the power I gave. Even if it was infinite, it's like the difference between an infinite number of fractions and an infinite number of multiples of two. That something is unlimited doesn't mean the portion also added would be greater than the sum of the parts. This rule is why I have struggled with being alone for all of my existence. You humans can't become equal to God. At least, I don't think so. The best God could manage was making you in his image and giving you limitless potential. But it's not like it's the end of the world either..." I spoke up, "Isn't that exactly what it is? The world is quite literally ending."

He clarified, "No, I mean, it's not as big a deal as all of that. Everything in existence goes in cycles. I was one with God in the Garden of Eden. I spoke with you humans directly. Then after Eden and knowing good and evil, you began to distinguish things as part of God ("good") or not part of God ("evil"). As if there is such a thing. Then people were so confused that I was born of a woman to tell them what was what. I wound up being hung for my trouble, but I made that work too. I was a kind of collective spirit called the Body of Christ for awhile, speaking indirectly to you humans over the

generations. Then Rena gave me her body, and well, here we are now. All things that are eternal go through different changes or cycles, you guys, the Earth, me. The New Earth will die, and the Earth will become something else. Things that are eternal constantly adjust. But there is something you can do, come to think of it..."

TAMASHII

They were being boring, so I watched *The Big O* using mother's Tablet. She wasn't catatonic anymore, but surely it wouldn't affect reality too much to binge watch a show outside of time. And from the sounds of the discussion with Zoe and Jesus, it wouldn't be needed very much longer. And so I watched the full 26 episodes in under a second, before I returned it to Mom's purse. I don't think she ever realized I'd taken it.

The story, if you've never seen this anime, is on the surface pretty straightforward.. Roger is a man living in noir city called Paradigm, where nobody seems remember history before 40 years. But the surface isn't really how things are. We find out that one of the characters is a robot, and the main character is a clone or something, and that nothing even existed before 40 years because the story is actually a script or something. The director, a girl named Angel, wants to scrap the entire thing and start over. In the end, he "negotiates" the script, talking her out of the repeat she intends. The story does indeed reset, but it is a *reset* not a repeat. The moral of the story being that life goes on, and we learn and grow from things instead of mind-numbingly being stuck in the same patterns. And that a story, even if the result is the same, is totally different based on tone. I thought if the difference between the universe eventually having to restart because it is old and stale, versus some concept like Jesus judging all creation based on arbitrary morals, and I understood the distinction. Likewise for eternity. An eternity alone or with someone you hate would be torture, while getting to spend all existence with those we love might be wonderful (at least, for as long as we continue to love them). Any story, whatever happens, is all tone.

When I was done, Jesus told me, "Careful with that thing. Long periods of television will turn your eyes into little boxes." I glared at

him, thinking he was being a busybody, but he had a smirk on his face. He was only teasing me.

AMBROSIA

Azrael and Zoe came back after discussing something with Jesus. I never found out what they talked about, but in any case, Alicia and Rena called me over to discuss something of their own. Then Azrael and Zoe walked up to me on the other side of Rena. "We need to transfer the power of the Oracle over to Jesus!" both groups exclaimed at the same time. I smiled, "Okay, no need to shout at me. But I do want some kind of explanation," only to get both groups talking at once, "one at a time, please." I had them sit down in a circle, only talking when they stood up. I didn't believe in raised hands.

Zoe went first, "Jesus told us that he needed the power of the Oracle and the power of God." I prompted her, "Did he say why?" She suddenly sat back down. "Okay, Alicia," I pointed to her, "Why should give my powers to Jesus? I mean, you literally just got back, and already you're wanting to give up your power and telling me to do the same." She stood up, and answered, "Well, this was my thoughts on the matter, and you can correct me if I'm wrong. I now have God's body, and the powers of the Oracle. I'm first in line for the 'throne'. You're second. You don't want it, right? From what I saw, watching as a spirit until I got my body back, you had a lot of really bad things happen to you, and can't handle that kind of role. I mean, you already had a breakdown where your daughter had to find a rare fruit for you to recover. And I don't want it. Rena and I would have similar lifespans on this Earth since we'd both be immortal, but after the New Earth is destroyed, I'd be eternal and thus survive, but she'd kinda sorta... not. Whatever Jesus plans to do, I trust him. Just as I trusted God enough to sacrifice my life those years ago to help out demons." I blinked, "Okay, I get what you're saying, but I'm a little dubious about your decision-making process when you say that you actually deliberately lost against Belial."

Alicia explained, "I guess a lot of people think of good as triumphing over evil. But when I look at two people fighting, I really have trouble saying that one of these is good and the other is bad.

Well, unless one is torturing the other or something. So the whole cackling witch that says something like, 'Ahh! After 10,000 years I'm free! It's time to conquer Earth'? No, it doesn't seem realistic. That poor witch was trapped in a jar for centuries. Of course she'd be right to seek justice against those who mistreated her in the past." I'm not sure I bought what Alicia was saying, but it was an interesting idea. In any case, while I ultimately did away with Belial, I had to admit that his hometown in Hell has gotten a lot better. Lilith took over Hell and set up a great deal of reforms. It became a haven where demons would not be harmed by outsiders, hurt each other, or hurt outsiders. The place was still depraved, but it was run by demons after all. And I had noticed that more of them seemed to have developed souls, or some form of restraint.

Oh well. I suppose everyone deserves a happy ending. Kinda like in that show *Once Upon A Time*, in the last season where they all ate together in the last season. "That wasn't the last season," Jesus interrupted, clearly reading my mind, "that was the second-to-last season. The last season had Hyperion Heights and..." I shushed him, as he was speaking nonsense, and I did some thinking.

I had always thought I had everything that I wanted. I had a guy with a hot body that would fit into a better dress than I could wear. I had a cute little girl with a spunky attitude, and a pretty good head on my shoulders. But there was always something that nagged me, and I couldn't figure out what it was. And then I finally realized. Becoming an Oracle had helped me meet Nevras, and the work I had done to dispose of creatures had helped me out of poverty. But I had always been unable to do certain things. Like, before I was Oracle, I had latent potential to be one, and more importantly I had God's power buried deep inside. This made me a rare creation who couldn't pray for God's blessing, could even get a bit of good luck, and I couldn't in fact be a farmer. The reason I wanted to be a farmer, come to think of it, was that it was hard for me. Because it was a normal thing that normal people did. But I usually needed Nevras to help, because things that I planted took forever to grow. Not that I didn't want his help, but I wanted to work with him, and not have a sense that I was

dragging him down.

Don't get me wrong. Alot of people do things out of a sense of "altruism." I don't believe in it. People who tell others to be more altruistic are assholes, and people who fall for it are chumps. Jesus died on the cross, not so each of us could in turn sacrifice our lives, but to pay off a debt. Alot of people think that there's a distinction between finished and complete, like a book is finished but it's not compete until it has all the appendices, a table of contents, page numbering, and an ending that doesn't seem rushed. But Jesus had another definition of finished. "It is finished" that he said on the cross, is a reference to a single Hebrew word that is stamped on debts paid and prisoners freed. Yup, Elias has taught me some things. As has Jesus. This means that each of us has to figure out what things we want to do with our lives, and what things are needless crap. So no, this wasn't a sacrifice. Each of us tries to be God of our own lives. I was unloading a burden, and Jesus was taking the duty of being God. Jesus was God after all, but he moved from being transcendent to personal and present within humanity, to being largely forgotten. I wanted to bring him back into people's lives, and that started with giving up the idea of myself as God. I wanted to be normal.

After a pause, I said, "Okay. But we'll need to work together, Alicia. I've never done any of my powers with another Oracle of Tao before. You know what you're doing?" She nodded.

We tried using the Tao together, but the first time, the harmonic quality of Resonance was off. I was too slow, and she was done too fast. Something about premature rotation. And so I coached her to go slower, to try to match the rhythm of my body. We followed through with the motions, and the more we did so, the more in sync we became. Eventually, we climaxed, and two yin-yang circles spun into each other. Like two singers in a concert, the Resonance combined, and soon there was one big Tao over all the world. Alicia and I collapsed to the ground. I could definitely tell. My powers were gone. Oh, I still had the training from before, and could dodge or use martial arts. And that freakish rock pushing technique was still with me. But I had not an ounce of Oracle power. Which ironically meant that now I

could probably learn magic from Elias or Zoe, because the power of the Oracle always prevented me from doing that. It also screwed with my ability to do farming, giving me a seriously brown thumb for planting things. Nevras and most of the population could plant something and watch it grow immediately, but I never had that happen to me before. I could tell that I wasn't God anymore, and I could tell that Jesus was. His floating in midair while Easter lilies bloomed below him was kind of a giveaway. But maybe that's just me.

He settled down to the Earth, and looked at us as we examined ourselves, "From now on, all living beings will live as long or as short as they desire. There will be no standards of lifespan. You can live as long or short as you wish, whether human or fox or mermaid or even angel. But no longer will there be any immortals. Even angels and demons can die of old age. These beings have lived a long time and done many duties for me, and it's time for them to rest. No longer will people pray to a distant God but I will be there directly for any who need me. I won't force anyone to worship me, you will have the right to believe as you wish. But I am everywhere that you need me." He was talking to us, but I later discovered that people even in Gruumi could hear this pronouncement. He was standing in from of them as easily as he was standing in front of us. It wasn't a holographic projection either. One little demon tried to tickle him as he made this speech in Hell, and he stopped the speech to chase them around before continuing, making that particular speech off sync with the rest. Jesus continued to speak to the entire New Earth, "However, all should know that when Ambrosia and Alicia transferred all their powers to me, the New Earth was damaged from the massive Resonance of the Tao, and will cease to be in a few generations. The Earth would have continued for several more eons if she didn't, but it was my desire to make a newer New Earth, simply called Earth." Wait, so he made us do this knowing that the New Earth would last much longer if we didn't?!? He continued, "I am sorry, everyone. But I will heal the sick, raise the dead, and banish the demons while this world exists. After that, all of you will go to the Afterlife, to be reborn in the world that will be made next." And with that, he walked away to do his mission.

Over the years to come, Jesus visited us in many forms. But unlike the other two versions of the Oracle of Tao, he used his power to heal, not to fight. Even though Jesus could bust heads, it really wasn't his style.

NEVRAS

I remembered what happened in one reality. Ambrosia became God because she healed Estheriel, and her form was so radiant that I had a heart attack and to all appearances died. When I awoke, I was Beyond All Things with Ambrosia, a Saint in her presence. And my spiritual body reformed into that of a woman named Nevrasia. To be honest, I liked it better that way. I remember yawning, “I'm kinda tired. What will we do tomorrow? How about a date?” Ambrosia responded, “I'd love to. Let's meet near Phoenix. At around nine...” But that date would never happen now.

Or so I thought. As it turned out, it was fully as easy for her to arrange a date at Phoenix at nine o'clock as a mortal as it was when she was God. The only was that we had to sail there from Kushiyama instead of just appearing there. We were only going for a shopping trip, and maybe to grab some coffee. We were originally going with just the two of us, but Tamashii insisted that we would be regarded as irresponsible parents if she wasn't allowed to travel with them.

On the way into town, we noticed Rena and Alicia shopping for wedding dresses. Alicia was actually a guy, I suppose, but everyone likes to look pretty for their wedding. Alicia picked an off-shoulder column wedding dress for a simple but effective feminine shape, while Rena picked a ball gown since she didn't want to try to keep her tails transformed. They gave us invitations, and we took them up on this later. Even though we had met only in time to destroy the New Earth, for the rest of our lives we remained friends. I got to see them vow to be together for as long as both shall live. But this is a story for another day, I suppose.

We shopped around town, but we didn't get very far before seeing Jesus himself hanging out with some red-haired girl. She was definitely not human though. She was wearing a large golden hooded robe and carrying a scythe. I recognized her immediately by her height, which was roughly double mine. "Rinne! Is that you?" We had

a short conversation, where Rinne introduced me to Jesus (who I already kinda knew), and we talked about how they met. Originally, she had hooked up with God, but then God kinda became Jesus so that sorta changed their relationship a bit, I guess. We eventually ran out of things to talk about for now, as I realized it was someone difficult to relate to her because I was now a mortal, while she and Jesus were eternal. Unlike Zoe and Azrael, who behaved as regular humans, Rinne was a bit awkward, since her job involved a like of weird things like sealing away gaps between dimensions or dealing with spirits. She was sweet though, and Jesus more than made up for her awkwardness around people.

Eventually we had enough of meeting family and friends though, and we decided to head to another area to have our lunch. Jesus mentioned a pretty good spot, and wrote some directions on a sheet of paper. From there, it is only a short hike to the cafe. I remember it from my childhood, so I knew it was a good recommendation.

"I still don't see why you brought me here," Ambrosia said. I pulls her inside anyway. "Relax," I said, "the food is great, and there are African, Asian, and European restaurants nearby. It's a regular slice of the old Earth here." Ambrosia argued, "How did you find this place anyway? I mean, we had to walk to the middle of nowhere, through some swamps and thickets. Couldn't you have gone to another town?"

I shook my head, "This lady makes the best coffee ever. It's like your coffee, only if you'd had thousands of years to perfect the art. And her churros are to die for! And it seems like everyone who attends her cafe gets helped out in a major way." Ambrosia scowled at me, "Didn't you say you'd only been here once and that was when you were a child? A lot can change over the years. This lady is probably old by know and no longer remembers how to cook." Ambrosia entered the store with me and started screaming. Tamashii follows behind, as she asked, "What are you two carrying on about, have you even ordered something for me... Aaaaaaaah!!!" For she saw that this cafe had mirror images of her parents working at the counter. The employee and the owner seemed unfazed by all this screaming. They asked, "What can I get you?" I quickly realized that these were an

alternate reality version of myself and God. In this version of the events, Ambrosia became God and after our nine o'clock date, we lived all eternity until time looped in on itself, then we set up a coffee shop in the past. Damned parallel universes.

Ambrosia ordered a scone with little nuts and a couple of chopped up rose petals on top for decoration. I ordered a garden salad and some tea. Tamashii ordered a slice of pizza with anchovies and a strawberry milkshake. The barista sliced fresh strawberries to put on top. I remember Tamashii asking Ambrosia to make it like this more than once. We thanked them and left.

AMBROSIA

Time passed. Lucy was pregnant with Nevras's child, who I guess was technically my second child. But I was so totally jealous of myself. Why did *she* get to snuggle up to my baby while I was in a catatonic coma thingy? But I gradually lost my jealousy and decided to make up with her, right around the time when her water broke and I saw the kid. I felt more sympathy than jealousy at that point. She named her Yami (meaning "darkness") for she was black. No, not black as in African (or POS, whatever they call them now to be politically correct), I mean her child was quite literally as black as sin, with jet black eyes and no white part (sclera). She was a feral child, and Jesus explained that the sin of killing Estheriel in one version had been taken from me and been given to Lucy's child. "I never expected her to have a kid," Jesus confessed, "so I figured it would be okay to transfer all that darkness into her womb." I asked Jesus to fix Yami, but Jesus explained that these things had to play out naturally. "A lot of things I can heal," Jesus said, "but some things I shouldn't heal." I was outraged, but put up it it. I guess he seemed what he knew what he was doing.

More years passed. Lilith had finally found a place where she belonged in Hell, but it was a part of Hell that she had built herself just outside the main town, using a tree from Heaven known as a Mana Tree. The tree sucked darkness from the land around it, creating a downright pleasant area where both Aqorm and Michael agreed to live with her. Michael had retired, leaving his duties to Estheriel. She

was a bit overzealous, but she appeared to enjoy her duties. The rest of the group also seemed happy, finding various ways to live out their lives.

Yami grew into a pretty feral boy, but it wasn't as bad as all that. Tamashii's friend Portia seemed to have left for awhile, and instead there was this boy named Bakamaru that hung around to play with Tamashii all the time. I expected Sastraneth to decide he was a prick or something, but she seemed like she knew him. Their child Rakuen was born, and despite the age gap, Yami immediately connected with Yami, and gradually the reverse became true. I was worried about how toxic Yami might be, and especially worried about the age gap and the incest part. But then, Yami also hung around Sastraneth, which was fine by me even though the age gap was even more extreme. Just ask any cougar, they'll tell you. A woman dating a younger man is perfectly fine! In any case, these two seemed to being a mellowing influence on Yami.

While all of this was going on, Tamashii had to talk to Bakamaru about something. After that, I assume Bakamaru and Tamashii broke up because I didn't see him anymore. But Portia was there constantly to cheer Tamashii up or whatever. In any case, Portia also helped Tamashii raise Rakuen, so it was all good. Tamashii, after years of feeling it from being driven out of Opening, finally felt like she belonged. She had become the archaeologist and famed researcher Tamashii Rinne d'Angeli, author of *Raising a Jun'nō : a Survival Guide for New Owners*, a popular bestseller. One copy somehow disappeared from the shelves though, making it into a library in the past.

Eventually it happened. Yami hurt Rakuen, and Rakuen declared they were so over. She never wanted to see him again, and used her barrier powers to arrange just that. With a magical equivalent of a restraining order, she removed herself from Yami's reality. Even if Yami was sitting right next to her, he couldn't see or hear her. Sastra tried to cheer him up, but he wouldn't stop crying. As he cried, black tears dripped from his body. Before, he was borderline psychopathic and incapable of remorse, but now, if only because he lost her, he was

able to understand remorse. The black tears disappeared into a puddle that vortexed into somewhere unknown, while Yami's skin and hair lightened. His skin was the same color as Nevras, and his hair was the logical mix of Ambrosia's and Nevras's, a soft green (not like Tamashii's weird purple hair). His eyes were last to turn normal, moving from solid black to a white sclera with a dark brown iris. As Sastraneth continued to try to cheer Yami up, over the next ten years, they became a couple. Rakuen found her own partner too, don't worry. But I'm sure you're wondering, what happened to all that darkness released by Yami?

BELIAL

These humans. Despite my plans to destroy them again and again, I never could find enough darkness to snuff them out for good. I needed something truly dark, like a massive pool of darkness... Yes, exactly like that pool of darkness bubbling up from the ground! With this, I could craft Statues of Darkness to place at five key points to corrupt the Earth. Soon, my plans would come to fruition. I would have a land suitable for demons. And those two pesky nuisances, Rena and Alicia... well, I'd get rid of them too.

JESUS

The tide was indeed rising. Any day now, and even now coming, the tide would wash everything away. Time was passing quickly now, and reality was breaking down, to be replaced with symbols and dream imagery.

While you wait for the end, I shall tell you a parable. Long ago, there was an old bamboo cutter and his wife. One day, while cutting, the bamboo cutter found a shining stalk of bamboo. When he cut it open, inside there was a baby girl. As the old man and woman had no children, he decided to take her home to his wife. They named her Princess Kaguya. From that day onward, when he cut open bamboo, he'd find a small piece of gold inside each bamboo stalk. And so, the family became rich. As she grew, she became very beautiful, and news of her beauty spread to neighboring kingdoms. Five princes came and asked for her hand in marriage. But the girl actually loved her parents, and was not interested. So she set challenges to them, she

met with each separately and asked them to bring a rare treasure. To the first, she asked to go to India and retrieve the great stone bowl of the Buddha. The second price was assigned to bring a branch from the jewel trees that grew on the floating mountains of Hourai. The third prince was to bring a robe made from the skins of the fire rats. The fourth was to bring a shell which swallows kept hidden in their nests. And the fifth was told to bring a jewel from the sea dragon.

The first prince was lazy and had a bad heart. He didn't go anywhere near India. He bought a large bowl from a potter, and dressed it up to look fancy. Then he delayed his return, saying that he was taking a long time getting back from India. Sakuya was no appraiser, but could recognize such an obvious fake. It had no spiritual power. When she received the bowl, she was so unimpressed she would not even see him, for although there was plenty of decoration to it, it had no heart.

The second one tried to trick her. He didn't believe Hourai existed (even though I happen to know it does exist, having met immortals that come from here), and so he hired three artisans to make it. Unlike the first artifact, this was made with love and care. It was more than a trinket, it was enchanted with permanent runes so that it would grow like a tree and drop green gemstones whenever it lost a leaf, and bloomed red gem flowers. Unfortunately, it was not the prince's love and care that made this relic. She was impressed with this, and was considering honoring her agreement when she noticed the artisans were squatting outside her place. After asking them what they doing, the truth came out. She likewise dismissed this man, but paid the artisans well for their efforts.

The third prince was very earnest and genuine in his love. He used all of his money, influence, and effort in order to find it, finally discovering it in China. And indeed, it was what it claimed to be. He fought these fire rats in a distant land of supernatural beings, and sewed a fine fireproof robe of their skin (as as fine as a robe made from the fur of rats can be. When it was put in the fire, it shined like silver and became bright instead of burning. But the bright robe attracted a dog demon, who gave it to his half-breed son. The man

wrote a letter describing the events. When Sakuya read it, she could tell his feelings for her were true, and she considered marrying him after all. But he had left in shame, never to return.

The fourth prince was a brute of a man. He threatened and coerced others to do it for him. Many of them got hurt as they were pecked by swallows defending their nests. The man tried to do it himself. He climbed a large tree where one was rumored to be, grabbing his hand into the nest and shoving birds eggs out of the nest as he reached for the shell. The swallows became so angry that they all pecked his hand, and he fell to his death. Sakuya received news of his death, but having met him before, she didn't miss him. Of the five artifacts, this one was the only one not particularly rare, but she knew it would be too difficult for him, given his aggressive nature.

The last prince was a great coward. He went with his men on a ship in order to look for the dragon jewel, but as soon as a storm came up, he declared that the dragon was displeased with his quest. He set out towards land and the storm died down. But the prince never went to sea again.

Many years passed and Kaguya-hime took very good care of her old father and mother. The mother and father finally realized why Kaguya-hime had asked the princes to do such impossible things and that Kaguya-hime had just wanted to stay with her parents. And Kaguya-hime knew that if she refused to marry them, they might be offended and hurt her family. And as each day passed, Kaguya-hime would grow more beautiful, kind, and gentle. Eventually when she was 20 years old her mother died and she became very sad. And whenever the full moon rose, she would go and weep.

One evening, Kaguya was sitting on a balcony, looking at the moon and crying a great deal. Her adopted father asked her what was wrong. She revealed that she had discovered was actually the princess of the moon, and she was sent down to help take care of them, but that eventually she would have to leave. By the next full moon, she said, people of the moon would come to take her back.

Her father became concerned about this, and so he spent most of his money to ask the emperor to station guards around her house. He set

up archers in watchtowers, pyrotechnics experts, and all manner of troops. The old bamboo cutter went home cheerful but Kaguya was sadder than ever. Kaguya visited her father in his bed on the night the full moon would come. He said to her, "I see now why you must go. It is because I am going too. Thank you my daughter for all the happiness you have brought to us." After that, he closed his eyes, and he was dead.

It was time for her to go, and the people of the moon came for her. But the emperor's guards refused to release her. They drew their weapons waiting for a great battle. Yet no battle came. A line of light like a bridge reached from heaven to earth and down this bridge came many soldiers with shining armor. The light turned emperor's soldiers to stone and they could not do anything against them. Kaguya went to the leader of these heavenly visitors and said that she was ready. The leader handed her a cup with the elixir of immortality and she drank from it and she would no longer be mortal. She would become a princess of the moon and live on forever. It is said that now and then when a white wreath of smoke that curls around Mount Fuji, that a floating bridge to that city in the moon can be seen in the sky.

And this is the meaning of the parable. In our life, we have good times and bad times. But eventually we have to die when it is our time. Attempting to live forever through mysticism or science is nonsense. Things eventually do end, and if God gives us immortality or a short life, this is how things are. That isn't to say we should just say be fatalist, if our swimming pool turns into a breeding ground for mosquitoes because we didn't bother to clean it, if our yard turns overgrown, this is not God's doing. We do our work in this life, and when it's time to go, we have no attachments and no regrets. I remember it was like this when I was on the cross. And this was what happened now.

Ambrosia was a good kid, but she'd made some choices that really hurt her. In this life, the idea that sin is something that God judges us because is wrong. Ultimately, when we sin, we hurt ourselves. Ambrosia was not being punished here, she had already created karmic debt with all the fighting she had done. It was important for

her to struggle, because she managed to find a way out of poverty, but the creatures she hurt caused her pain nonetheless. Likewise, I did not come to condemn the world. But it did have to end at some point, and it seemed fitting that it end for a good cause. Like with Kaguya dying at the same time as her parents, there was no ill intent behind this destruction. It just seemed like the right time for this sort of thing to happen.

The tides came in, and swept away all of the sand houses. It swept away all of the sand. It even knocked over the little girl, but she was a good swimmer. Then she got up, and all around her was the waters of a deep Void. Only, the girl wasn't the same anymore. Eventually, the waters receded, and there was land again. The was sky. There was a sun and moon. And there was the Earth again. It was peopled with primitive people, but these people were different from Adam and Eve. They had God in their heart. They worshiped as they pleased. I didn't really care what they believed, just so long as they took good care of the Earth and each other. They knew the little girl. They knew me.

THE CURTAIN

Rena, Alicia, Ambrosia, Nevras, Tamashii, Elias, Aqorm, Sastraneth, Portia, Yazim Jianne, Michael, Lilith, Selqui, Lao Tzu, and all the children from this trilogy stood upon the stage. So did Zoe and Azrael, and Jesus and Rinne, though they stood slightly apart from everyone else. Asmodeus, Satan, Estheriel, and Belial came from stage left, and walked being the main cast. Various kings, parents, and so on filled the rest of the stage. The stage was unlike any earthly stage, for the inside of the building was a white monochrome, with even the air appearing a misty white color. The audience were billions upon billions of souls, all of which were destined for the Afterlife after the clapping was done, if they had not already made it their home. Ambrosia and Nevras bowed together, followed by Tamashii, and they held hands and walked down toward the audience. They faded away into the crowd. Elias and Aqorm bowed together, then Elias walked off alone. Aqorm bowed with Lilith, then she too walked off while Lilith bowed once more with Michael. These two walked off separately. Yazim Jianne had a former

wife nearby, she bowed with him, then Selqui bowed with Yazim Jianne, and they walked off together, carrying several strange lifeforms behind them. Sastraneth bowed with Portia, but then Portia ran off stage as if to catch up with Tamashii. The villains bowed together, and each walked of separately. Lastly most of the other characters just waved and left in loose crowds. Lao Tzu blended in with one of the crowds, so as not to make a fuss. Soon only Zoe and Azrael was still on stage with Jesus and Rinne. Zoe wanted to thank the academy, but nobody bothered to stick around. The audience had decided the play was over, apparently. The curtain closed. They returned to the Afterlife, leaving just those four sitting on the stage.

"What now?" Zoe asked. "Well," Rinne said, "the stage is part of the area Beyond All Things. You could step off the stage with the others, and become a regular human. Or you could come with us to check out the new world." She and Jesus walked backstage instead of towards where the audience had been, not waiting for their answer. After a few moments, Azrael and Zoe had consulted and were sure. They too walked backstage. Both couples held hands as they went. Eternity would be better this time.

Long ago, God had said to Adam, "It is not good for man to be alone," shortly before he broke him into two sides. God said the same sort of thing before making the universe. But none of them were alone. Not anymore.